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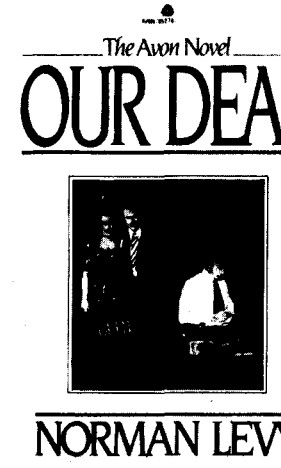


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A magazine of literature and the arts

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THE HUDSON REVIEW is published quarterly by The Hudson Review, Inc., 684 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10021. It is a member of The Council of Literary Magazines, and is indexed in the Social Sciences and Humanities Index. Book reviews are indexed in Book Review Index, and poems in Index of American Periodical Verse.

Subscription $14.00 per year in U. S.; foreign including Canada $15.00. Single copy $4.00. Special rate for bulk orders. U. S. distributor: B. De Boer, Inc., 113 E. Centre Street, Nutley, N. J. 07110. Library subscriptions in England: Periodicals Division, B. H. Blackwell Ltd., P. O. Box 40, Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford. Back issues and reprints of Volumes I—XXXIV available from AMS Press, Inc., 56 East 13th Street, New York, N. Y. 10003. Microfilms of Volumes I—XXXIV available from University Microfilms, Inc., 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. We handle directly all requests for permission to photocopy.

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Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the Editors. The Editors are responsible for the entire contents of the magazine. THE HUDSON REVIEW does not have, and has never had, special "Poetry," "Fiction," "Articles," or "Book Review" editors.

Printed in the United States of America. Second Class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Registered U. S. Patent Office.

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## FROM OUR READERS

Dear Editors,

In the course of Mary J. Carruthers' essay "The Re-Vision of the Muse" (THE HUDSON REVIEW, Summer 1983), we are reminded again and again that the myth-making of poets like Rich, Lord, Grahn, and Broumas is a struggle born of historical and cultural necessity. Until recently I hadn't realized that what we have been calling serious literature is by and large men talking to men. Women have always been in the position of eavesdroppers who then have to "translate" the terms of most of what they read. For those of us men who want to open our eyes (and ears) to the real lives of women, eavesdropping and translating ourselves, Mary J. Carruthers' essay provides beginnings of understanding. I'm grateful to her.

RICHARD HOFFMAN

*Southern Shores, North Carolina*

Dear Editors,

This note is sent to express my appreciation of Dean Flower's "Fiction Chronicle" (THE HUDSON REVIEW, Summer 1983). His astute analyses of the writers mentioned certainly improved my understanding and enjoyment of their work.

The entire Summer 1983 edition of THE HUDSON REVIEW is superior—superior in every respect. I'm glad to be a subscriber.

CATHERINE R. WILLIAMS

*Levittown, New York*


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Congratulations to Marge Piercy and Jane Augustine whose poems in Vol. I have been nominated for Pushcart Prize 1983 edition.


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# Letter from London

DEAR H,

I wonder if American writers will band together and take inspiration from a new scheme we have, under which British writers will soon start to benefit. This is the Public Lending Right scheme, or PLR. It means that at the end of this year, the first writers will start receiving small sums of government money to pay them for loans of their books from public libraries.

British writers have been agitating for this for about thirty years. Nowadays, most people here read new fiction in copies that they borrow from the local library. The majority of hardback novels sell under 2,000 copies, of which at least 1,500 will have been bought by libraries—but up to a hundred people may well borrow each library copy. So until now a writer will often have got a negligible sum for writing a book which may be read by 150,000 people. Free libraries are a splendid idea—but they don't help authors to make much of a living.

It was the novelist Brigid Brophy who did most to campaign for the new scheme. She created WAG, or the Writers' Action Group, and sent her own little pink postcards indefatigably to Members of Parliament and journalists or anyone else who might help or hinder.

All sorts of objections were made to the idea. Lawyers and Civil Servants clung to the legal notion that a book is an "artefact," in which no rights can be retained once it is sold. Public librarians feared that in the end their readers would find themselves paying for the scheme. (They did also reasonably point out that many of the books on their shelves would not have been published at all, if it had not been for the expectation that the libraries would buy them.)

But WAG battled on, and four years ago the Government finally conceded the case. A PLR Act was passed, a "registrar" and an office were set up to run the scheme, and a fair sum of money was promised to be handed out to those writers who are borrowed as well as bought.

But writers are still not very happy. The Parliamentary draughtsman who composed the Act himself wrote to the *Times Literary Supplement* last year, complaining that his instructions were so vague that he had been obliged to produce something "phoney in conception, ill-considered in policy and substantially unworkable in practice." While questioning where the blame for that lay if it did not lie with him, writers have agreed with some of these sentiments.

Some faint-hearted ones have simply been daunted by the form they have to fill in: every separate edition of a book, with its ISBN number, has to be recorded. More seriously, a book with the illustrator's name on the title-page cannot be included without the illus-

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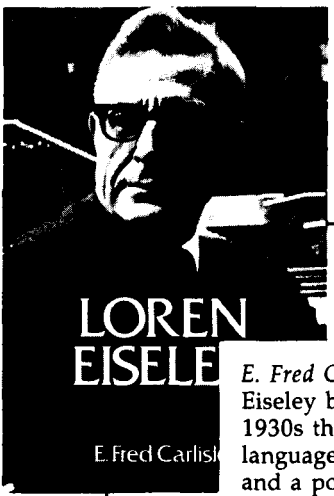


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trator also putting in a claim for his share. Artists are a wandering tribe, and a long list of lost illustrators has just been published by anguished authors.

The system of sampling has also provoked doubts. The work will be done on computers, so it may be accurate enough as far as it goes. But will it really be representative? Once writers know which libraries are being used for the sample, won't they send hordes of friends and relatives in to borrow their books during that year? There is also a £5,000 limit on the amount any one author can receive in a year, and that has led to particularly shrill cries of "Muddle!" PLR is not supposed to reward merit in books, but merely to pay authors for the number of borrowings their books are blessed with. It was feared, however, that this would mean rich and popular authors just getting richer, while poor authors of exalted but limited appeal got practically nothing. The upper limit was devised so that the money should be spread a little more evenly. But this compromise does give a slight ring of truth to the draughtsman's words "phoney" and "ill-considered."

The draughtsman ended by saying: "Fortunately for the taxpayer, the Treasury was able to limit the allocation of public money to a million or two." And that fact—though hailed with rather different noises—is what the writers have most dwelt on. In fact, for the first year, the government allocation will be £2 million, of which perhaps half a million will be needed for administration. It's not very much, and even with the application of the upper limit it won't mean much of a killing for anybody.

Nevertheless, a scheme which undoubtedly has a rough and ready justice about it is at last under way. We can hope that time will improve it and that the money will grow. As for the first writers who succeed in filling in their forms, the difficulty the others are experiencing will be a pure benefit. Only about 7,000 had their names in by the end of June, when the list for the first half-year closed. For them, the spread of money won't be so bad, after all!

The British have not lost their interest in birds and the countryside, even though the majority of them are now born in towns or suburbs. And birds have not lost their interest in Britain, either—several species have invaded us from the Continent since the war, and one of them, the collared dove, which was hitherto entirely unknown, has rapidly become a very common bird, singing in every village street.

Watching a new English film, *The Draughtsman's Contract*—nothing to do with that unfortunate chap who had to draw up PLR, but a black comedy set in seventeenth-century England—I suddenly heard a collared dove singing in the background in one open-air scene. Ignorant townee director, I thought. Then a few weeks later, watching a television version of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*,

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# THE ANIMALS

A five hundred poem pastoral by Richard Grossman

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set in Cornwall in the years before the First World War, I heard a collared dove singing again.

I wrote a letter to *The Times* about this creeping anachronism. It was published under the heading "Flight of Fancy." And what a spate of letters it set off! Half the people who tuned into radio or television seemed to be nature experts. One man claimed to have heard collared doves singing in adaptations of Dickens and Trollope; another listed all the months in which background birds had been heard singing when in reality they would have been silent or abroad; a third scored very high by pointing out that the eerie effects produced by hooting owls in an Irish play would have been quite impossible, since tawny owls (like snakes) are not found in Ireland. It was even suggested that the BBC has an Unnatural History Unit in addition to its famous Natural History Unit.

But in spite of all this enthusiasm for nature, the countryside is under threat. Large-scale modern methods of farming are inclined to swallow up the hedges where so many birds nest, the little undrained patches of meadow down by a river where wild orchids have flourished for centuries. Some government protection is now given to what are called SSSIs—Sites of Special Scientific Interest—but even that does not always prove very successful, when challenged by a determined farmer.

A more general concern for the welfare of birds and animals is also very noticeable just now. A girl standing by me in a shop was wearing a badge: "Fight Speciesism." "That's like racism, is it?" I said. "One species exploiting another?" "That's it." I suggested that the campaign had a pretty big task on hand, considering that virtually every species of creature in the universe survives by exploiting another. "In fact," I said, "man is surely the only species that to some extent tries not to." She agreed, rather embarrassed, with this. "Still, they've started trying to turn some dogs into vegetarians," she added, with a not-very-hopeful look.

The curious fact is that people who enjoy hunting or shooting, just like medical researchers who have to experiment on animals, often take great pleasure in animals, too, and sometimes care more about their interests and welfare than other people do. Their sport or profession sits side by side in their lives with their other imaginative feelings about animals, without causing any great intellectual discomfort. In the same way, farmers can look after their animals' well-being, even though they find it perfectly natural to have them slaughtered for food in the end. Ornithologists can enjoy a game pie. There seems to be some natural, deep-seated discontinuity in the human mind in this matter.

The Labour Party tried to profit from the "Fight Speciesism" mood by including a plan to abolish fox-hunting and similar sports in its election manifesto; but I don't think it did them much good. Especially in the North of England, hunting is not particularly a class sport nowadays; so working men who might have responded

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to Labour's ideas in other matters were liable to be turned off by this proposal. Certainly when the Labour Party leader, Michael Foot, visited one Yorkshire village just before the June election, the crowd who turned out with the West Yorkshire Mink Hounds to bark at him was very mixed socially. (I should explain that many American mink have escaped from British fur farms and now live wild in the countryside, where they are providing a new object for hunting.) The village confrontation ended with a musical comedy scene—rival groups singing "The Red Flag" and the old hunting song "D'ye ken John Peel?" at each other.

However, an Australian philosopher, Peter Singer, made quite a hit with a BBC television lecture he gave in the spring, on the subject of "Animal Liberation." He argued very logically that if we start with the moral attitude that "others" have equal rights with oneself, we are obliged to ask precisely who those "others" might be—and he claimed that, with the knowledge we now have, it is hard to deny animals the right to be included among such "others." We must "take the final step in expanding the circle of ethics," he said. More practically, he went on to suggest that instead of using animals in experiments, scientists might start looking for human volunteers to take their place. But there hasn't yet been a surge forward of animal liberationists to espouse that role.

Back to the pleasures of the town. Opera is thriving in London, the theatre rather less so, at least when it comes to new plays. I know a man who says he can hardly bear to sit in a theatre now: he keeps thinking "Why are they all talking when they could be singing?"

At Covent Garden we have had Poulenc's *The Carmelites*, evoking a heady postwar mood in France for which many English people feel strong nostalgia. It is an opera about an aristocratic young nun at the time of the French Revolution, and how she finds the courage to die for her faith. But it's full of late forties feeling; all the moral dilemmas of the wartime French Resistance come into it, the swirling clashes and strange meetings between Communism and Catholicism, continual echoes of Mauriac and Sartre, Bresson (who made a wonderful film set in a convent, *Les Anges du Péché*) and Cocteau. It ends with almost the entire convent mounting the *piste* to the guillotine; and there was a certain piquancy for Covent Garden operagoers a few weeks later, when they saw all the prostitutes in *Manon Lescaut* going up the gangplank, winking or spitting at the soldiers, onto the ship that was to take them into exile at New Orleans, at exactly the same spot on the stage, probably using the same steps.

Then we had the first chance to hear Verdi's *Don Carlos* in the original French version, with some music that Verdi had subsequently dropped—notably a great lament, by a chorus of peasants, to the aristocrats hunting in the misty morning at Fontainebleau.

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This was in a production by the Italian film director, Visconti, first put on in 1958—and still looking just as beautiful, twenty-five years later.

Best of all at Covent Garden this season, though, was their new production of Handel's *Semele*. It was presented almost in pantomime style. The Arcadian scenes were Watteauesque, the scenes in Jove's sensuous heaven like something out of Boucher. Semele, after she had been carried off by Jove, floated in on a cloud singing her glorious aria,

> Endless pleasure, endless love,
> Semele enjoys above.

Juno scoured the skies for her rival with a small gold telescope, Iris descended in a floral basket with a safety-belt of blue ribbon, Somnus had a pretty young girl to keep him company in his giant bed. It was all done with taste, but it teased out to the full the wit and colour in the music. I'm sure Handel would have loved it.

The other London opera house is the old Coliseum Theatre, where the English National Opera now performs. Here the works are all sung in English, a benefit to some visitors, a loss to others.

I hate translated librettos, normally. If the original librettist has worked well with the composer, the musical rhythms and the natural rhythm of the language will be working together too, emphases in both falling in the same place, long and short vowels answering to corresponding notes. In *The Dyer's Hand*, W. H. Auden has a very vivid essay describing his struggles to get all this right when he was working with Stravinsky on *The Rake's Progress*. In a translation, how can such harmony possibly survive? What hope is there that any natural ways of speaking in the new language will correspond length for length, stress for stress, with the music? One usually ends up either with absurd words that fit the sound, or with natural language dragged into continuous distortions.

But the ENO had a triumph in this respect with their new *Rigoletto*, which was directed by Jonathan Miller, with a new English libretto by the poet James Fenton. It was an exceptional *Rigoletto*, first, in that the story was transposed to New York in the 1950s, with the Duke becoming "the Duke," a Mafia boss, and Rigoletto, the jester, becoming a barman. This transposition was one of the few I have seen that really worked (though a companion of mine at the Coliseum that night wondered why Rigoletto didn't call an ambulance when he found his daughter dying).

However, the libretto was the most remarkable feature of this *Rigoletto*. James Fenton, no doubt partly inspired by the bold transference of it all to New York, simply set out to write sensible, singable lines, totally disregarding the original diction where no close equivalent would work. The famous aria, *La donna è mobile*, appears in the standard English libretto as

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How fickle women are,
Fleeting as falling star . . .

The first line is lame, the second almost meaningless; and there is an absurd whoosh of emphasis on the first syllable of "women" and "falling."

Fenton has

Women abandon us.
  Why should it hurt them
  If we desert them . . . when it's all over?
Women make fools of us.
  Laugh in our faces,
  Cover their traces . . . take a new lover.

How forceful and idiomatic, and with what proper expressiveness the bitter emphasis falls on "ab*an*don" and "fools"!

Fenton, incidentally, is a poet to watch. His elegant volume of poems, *The Memory of War*, got more votes than any other for the "book of the year," in the survey that the literary Sundays publish at Christmas.

From a stage New York to the real New York. I was over at the end of last year (in fact I was a guest of *The Hudson Review*—I'd been one of the judges for the Bennett Award, and was kindly invited over for the presentation of the prize to Seamus Heaney). Actually it was my first visit to New York, so perhaps you'll allow a few of an Englishman's first impressions of the city.

I shall never forget walking down Park Avenue to the Helmsley Building. That must be the supreme urban experience. The air gets darker, the skyscrapers get taller and taller, thicker and thicker, around you—here you live life on our terms or not at all, they seem to say—and as you look ahead to the Helmsley, and the Pan Am rising up behind it, you begin to feel with obscure panic that there will be no way out. Then you slip through the arcades into 42nd Street, its free life and its flowing vistas, and you look back on what you've just been through as a sort of thrilling ordeal by stone, like the ordeals by fire and water in *The Magic Flute*.

It was marvellous, too, to set that experience against the sensation you have as you approach the southern tip of Manhattan Island by boat, after a trip out to the Statue of Liberty. Narrowing as it does to a tiny point at the Battery, Manhattan looks from the boat as if it is no more than a small, muddy island in a pond. Then you lift your eyes to the soaring downtown buildings, and brood with amazement on the unparalleled concentration of urban life there is in that narrow strip of land you are approaching.

I whizzed up and down in the buses in the freshness of the early morning, or ground my way slowly through Midtown on them at

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midday, standing among the elegant women coming in to shop. You seem to take the pulse of the city so much more readily than you do in the diffuse life of London. I particularly liked the restaurants and bars near the Lincoln Center, so busy in the evening between six and quarter to eight, when the entire clientele were liable to rise to their feet and march across the road to their concert, play, ballet or opera. London shows begin generally at 7:30, and there is not much of that leisurely dining beforehand. In the Met, it was very nice to be able to buy a glass of champagne: there are few public places in London where you can do that, because barmen won't risk the rest of the bottle going flat. And of course nowhere else in the world can you sip your champagne standing under a great Chagall.

In short, I found and loved the electricity of New York of which one reads so much—to the extent that once a blue spark actually jumped between my hotel doorkey and the lock.

I'll be back!

Yours,
DERWENT MAY

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ROBERT McDOWELL

# The Malady Lingers On

Bill Davis. The name a palmreader
Dredged from the ruts of her hand.
Tina makes like it's no big deal,
But she's willing, even desperate,
To meet the man the fortuneteller describes.
That alone is enough to bring her to Madame Fay.
That and a carload of her friends
Needing breaks from husbands who never call them *princess* anymore.

Tina's story, the flip side of a white Christmas,
Began on a farm in Southern Illinois
In the early 1950s. She fears that it stops there, too.
At age 5, turning cartwheels on her bed,
She crashed through a window, tumbled onto the porch.
The damage to herself was minor. Her mother, relieved,
Wept. Daddy paddled her behind.
Come Sunday the family knelt in church.

She was guilty and she knew it. In the bedroom
With her sister undressing dolls she was guilty,
But at 16 her status as a cheerleader helped.
"After all, she has acrobatic skills,"
Mom and Dad agreed. It was tough competition for prayer—
Human pyramids and athletes sassy in their sweats.

But she was not long satisfied with kids her age.
She was after something else,
And found it with a local boy just out of the Marines.
Sleek as a halfback, the boy was all God and Country.
When he said, in so many words, that he *was* a god
She said "why not?" and let him in.
In no time at all the mother of many children

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And living in the suburbs (and not yet 22) she said,
"It felt like the beginning of a story."

Bill Davis, home from work, uncaps a beer
And reads *The Wall Street Journal.* The economy
Is bad and he feels it in his gut.
He burps and thinks of divine intervention,
Replays the day's events, his public self.
"Nobody knows my own true worth," he muses,
"Least of all myself." He says,
"The only thing worse than breaking down
In public is breaking down when you're alone."

The thought clasps him until well after sunset.
"You don't know what a help you are," he says to the cat.
"Evenings when I cannot tell the house
From all the others on the block I look
For you in the window. Are you looking for me?
I wish you'd speak."
Night after night he watches the news with his cat,
Which is to say alone, or reads a book,
Or works his thumbs and ponders what he was—
A kid who one day thought he'd spruce the fishpond
Up by pouring antiseptics in it.
Nobody said a word but he was proud
Until the fish surfaced, belly-up and bloated.

Tina says to her friends, "let's grab a drink."
Inside the bar she heads for the Ladies Room
Where she looks up Davis in the phone book.
"Hundreds," she hisses, "and a dozen Williams."
She clasps her handbag shut as if slamming a door
And stalks out to a margarita.

Meanwhile Bill is bored with books and TV.
If a stranger called and said his name came up
In her hand that afternoon would he believe it?
He suffers from indigestion and rubs his face,
Thinking he needs a shave. He thinks of the cat,

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But he will not shave for her.
He wonders if he shouldn't sit in her lap.
"Maybe I should just tie her up," he mutters,
While wondering how it feels to be tied up.
He thinks of his escape trumpeted on the news.
His chest swells.

Tina bites her lower lip
And stamps out her cigarette.
"Butt-end of another boring day," she says,
Then weaves her way out to the parking lot.

After several struggling minutes Bill is ready—
Hogtied he kneels on a kitchen chair,
A noose around his neck,
The rope knotted round a water pipe.
Sockless, red in the face, he tries
To free his hands. The chair rocks.

Maybe a neighbor glancing through a window
Will spot him and call the cops.
Or Tina may arrive, checking addresses
From the page she ripped out of the phone book.
Surely Bill and Tina will turn up eventually,
But in what condition?
Neither one is thrilled about tonight.

## Coed Day at the Spa

Sunday. He ought to be in church
But he's here instead to sweat with women.
Bicycle wheels hum, treadmills grind
Like equations in a teacher's faulty lesson plan.
One smart-ass reads a novel on his bike;
Another, humping the language, gulps air
Between each word about the local news—

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The fortunes of the AAA ball team,
Who shot the mayor, the widening of the street.
Reverend Bill swoops in to gladhand everyone,
Yapping it up for God.

Only the women are working like they mean it,
Their burrowing expressions screwed on tight as lug nuts.
They do not pause between stations.
They do not loiter round the fountain
Taking in the sights. They do not care
How much your jumpsuit cost or what you do for pay.
Kisses, wine and candlelight result
In cellulite and loathsome flab.
They break themselves on incline boards.
They shriek like whistles blown in a closet.
They rise like Lazarus and spread the word.

He stretches in a corner, shy and misunderstood.
He knows the women group him with the others,
One more Jupiter with microscopic prick
Who lifts to show his strength—
One big push and he's done.
He opposes this with many repetitions
Ending flat on his back, wheezing like a bellows.
"You ought to give up smoking," Miss Tri-State says.
"Do you always shave before a workout?"
She smiles like a spasm.
"Let's pump some iron," she says.

So it's him she wants. She knows
The subtle art of shrinking men.
The curl machine convinces him she deserves her title.
At the benchpress she cranks out twenty repetitions at 225.
Nobody can press like her, least of all himself.
Though his neck has mushroomed half a size,
Though his arms, once thin and flakey
As chicken legs in a crockpot, bulge with terror,
He lies down like a victim, overmatched.
Looking up he asks, "Do you think this might be love?"
She sets the weight. Laughter swells like a bicep.

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# Working a #30 Sash Tool, Thinking About the Pope

"There is no hurt in this profession," Buck muttered,
Checking a door for skippers.
He was thinking about spaghetti
And glancing at his watch—10:30.
He reminded himself that he was tough
And could take it. He worked like that awhile,
Taunted by the vision of a savory meat sauce.

Meanwhile the radio informed him of the Pope's condition.
The Pope was dead, was gravely wounded.
The Pope escaped serious injury.
Bystanders were injured or praying.
One bullet was fired and there were many.
The assailant acted alone and with others.

Buck was furious.
He hated the voices that fed him the news.
He hated the bleeders supporting gun control.
"That's the trouble with foreigners," he grumbled,
"Always singing too loud and losing their tempers."

Buck devised a program of blood control.
He wondered just how his country could do that
And did not think of his Scotch and German forebears.
He was American, the best damn painter
In Southern Indiana. Didn't he mix his own colors?
Hadn't he won the contest?

"Nobody will shoot me in this profession," he stammered.
Then he crossed himself and prayed for the Pope.
"Up here on this ladder I feel close to God," he whispered.
He thought of the Pope falling into the arms of his
secretary.
Had he fallen like a lovesick girl or like a child

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Walking a ledge, astonished at missing a step?

These images of softness were foreign, also.
Flustered, he shook himself thinking
"He fell like a man shot in a jeep."
But a voice somewhere was saying
"The Pope is not a man." Buck finished off
A run of putty and spoke as wood might speak—"He fell."

Buck thought about his wife, happy in her kitchen,
Who had probably turned the radio off
At the first report, hating the terror
And the intrusion on her easy listening.
He did not know which she had hated most
And he did not want to think more on it.

He knew that the look on her face would be grim
As she'd turn to her recipe box with a passion
Which he would call *vengeance*. He was sure
She'd run out to meet him on the driveway
And he'd puff up like bread in her arms and she'd say
"Isn't it awful? Guess what we're having for supper."

"The world is sick but I'm getting by," he snarled,
Working a toothbrush dipped in thinner under his nails.
He was looking ahead to a round of golf,
To the next job and the next.
He was doing his part. Not for himself or his wife,
Not for you or me. Just doing it.

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KATHLEEN HILL

# Sisters and Brother

Our Aunt Grace was buried on the last warm day in November. One day later, they told us, the gravediggers would have stopped work for the season; then she would have gone into a vault until spring. Grace had hated the winter and always worn a sweater except on the hottest days of summer. Maybe that was the reason she didn't like to visit our mother in the house where they, and, a generation later, we had grown up. The house was cold. Our mother preferred the winter. She said she liked to see the outline of trees, to feel the sting of cold on her face. In the summer she felt dead. "That's when I come alive," Grace would reply, then compress her lips and shake her head. "Can't stand the cold. Don't know why you like it."

Grace always looked huddled up against herself, trying to keep warm. In the upstairs hall of the house in New Rochelle is a picture of Grace and her twin sister, Mary, each lying bundled in one of their mother's arms. She must have been warm then. A year later Mary fell from a carriage and died of head injuries. That left two children: our mother, four at the time, and Grace, just turned one. Their own mother, the dark-haired woman in the picture looking down so peacefully at the babies in her arms, had kept a journal following the twins' birth. It breaks off, a month after Mary's death, with a single entry: "Every night I dream of her as a baby of two weeks. She is sitting on my lap, her helpless back with its fine hair buckled forward; one of my hands supports her jaw while with the other one I caress her head, feel the plates of skull that have not yet knit together in a sheet of bone. Or sometimes she is lying on her back on the bed, crying tearlessly, her arms making those strange amphibian motions of newborns, swimming through space. I raise her to my shoulder. We walk back and forth, my hand moving up and down her spine, soothing her quiet. The thought of her flesh

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makes me dizzy. It doesn't help that Mary's crib has been given away and her clothes distributed. Grace remains."

In fact, Grace remained seventy more years. "Poor Grace," our mother would say. "She's had all the bad luck." The day after Pearl Harbor was bombed Grace married Patrick who, in a few weeks, was sent to the Pacific. He returned some months later with a disability pension, discharged on medical grounds. The doctors said that in New Guinea he had incurred a weak heart that would last him about seven years. During those years—exactly seven—he and Grace produced five children who all had eyes like Grace's: full of light that hid more than it revealed. The year before his death Patrick put the house in order: in the kitchen he built cupboards with special revolving shelves, a room in the basement where the children could play, a platform for a television opposite her bed so Grace would be able to finish the day in adult company. The last time we saw him, Patrick stuck his head into the car where we were sitting, ready to leave. "Don't wait till I'm lying in McGinnis' to come back to see us." Our parents laughed and protested, warmed by an afternoon of conversation and drinks in the sun, and we all turned back to wave at Grace who was standing with a baby in her arms on the steps of the house. The next time we saw Patrick, however, he was at McGinnis', laid out in his green army uniform, the tie rising stiffly from its knot before sinking onto his chest.

After Patrick's death, we saw less of Grace. It had been Patrick, always, with his slow dark eyes and lingering handshake who had welcomed us and waved goodbye. Without him, no one seemed to know where to look, least of all our mother and Grace. When they met, each would look past the other to her nieces and nephews, our mother bending quickly to kiss a child, Grace leaning backward to focus her gaze and ask if anyone were hungry. Our father would immediately set off on a long walk by himself, and the older children begin a game of cards that lasted till it was time to leave. We always played sprawled on the floor of the same little room. Over us towered the grandfather clock that had once stood in the hall of the house in New Rochelle but which Grace had asked for after Patrick's death. Looking up from our cards, we could

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see the silent moon sailing above, or hear, over the shuffle of cards, the wheeze of the gong sounding the hours. Together our mother and Grace sat on the couch talking. Our mother would rest one arm along the back, her eyes drifting over Grace's face, while Grace, upright in a green sweater, chafing her hands together for warmth, explained how much she had paid for the baby's snowsuit, the bargain she had found in girls' shoes.

One visit only is distinct in memory from the others. As usual we were on the floor playing cards and as usual Grace and our mother were sitting side by side on the couch. But the incident begins in silence. They are bent over a photograph of themselves as children that our mother had come across the week before and shown us. In the picture the two of them stand together in a blaze of light with their mother, whose face is hidden by the sharp tilt of her hat; behind them is a young version of the tulip tree that grows against the side of our house. Grace, in the middle, is clutching her elbows and looking with a wide, impassive gaze straight into the eye of the camera; our mother, taller than Grace, scowls at the ground from under dark brows. The silence in the room, as they stare at the picture, absorbs the slap of cards on the floor, the repeated click of the pendulum describing its arc. Then our mother speaks, wondering aloud why they have so few memories of this unknown woman, their mother, who after all hadn't died till they were in their teens. Did Grace, too, always connect her with darkened rooms and enforced quiet? What was wrong?

Grace's lips twitch together, then apart. "I'll tell you what it was," she says. "She couldn't stand to touch me. I cried at her funeral. But I promised myself then I'd never cry again. And I haven't. Not even when Patrick died." Our mother makes some awkward movement, leaning forward to look into her face, but Grace is already on her feet, pulling her skirt straight.

On the November morning of our Aunt Grace's funeral, my sister, Maddie, walks up the hall of the apartment where I live into the sunny room in front. Together we are going to the funeral with our older brother, who will arrive in a few

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minutes. Each of us is married, each of us has children, but the three of us are going to the funeral alone. While we wait Maddie and I sit at the round oak table, listening to Brahms and sipping tea from mugs. The sun falls through the green depths of the plants hanging in the open windows onto the floor in long slanting rectangles. We can see the bare branches of the ailanthus tree across the street; on such a warm day branches should be heavy with leaves. We agree on that. Maddie is wearing very high heels and a longish skirt that swings forward in front when she walks. As always, I am wearing pants and boots. We want to be sure nobody will mistake us for each other. In fact, we look entirely different. Maddie has long straight honey-colored hair she wears twisted in a knot on the back of her head. My hair is dark and curly. Yet throughout our childhoods, inexplicably to us, teachers and friends of our parents confused us. "Oh yes, of course," they would say when one of us sullenly refused to answer to the other's name. "You don't really look at all alike." But that didn't prevent their mixing us up again and again. In dead earnest we tried to make the confusion impossible. I became more outspoken; Maddie grew silent. She spent more time alone; I surrounded myself with people. As we got older, we held long conversations in which we defined ourselves in contrast to the other. These talks always began in moments of understanding and rest. At first we would listen with almost exaggerated attention, generously agreeing where at another time we would have objected. But then things would get confused.

"It's good to be quiet, Maddie. You're much more aware of other people if you're a bit silent."

"And it's nice for people that you talk so much. You liven things up."

"The only thing to be careful of is not to become withdrawn. You don't want to shut people out."

"I think there's more danger of that in your noise."

Instantly we would be filled with rage, furiously denying what we feared were fatal incapacities in ourselves. If they were fatal, each of us thought, it was only because of the existence of the other.

But the most important fact between Maddie and me was

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the year that divided us. I was older; she was younger. With Maddie I couldn't resist playing the part of the first, the enviable one, and she, rebelling the whole time, couldn't acknowledge me in any other role. Chafing against my protection, she felt abandoned by demonstrations of my need. I, on the other hand, was impatient of her reliance on me, yet felt tender toward her because of it. Her self-sufficiency affected me as a desertion.

"I brought you a piece of the cake I made last night," Maddie says, opening her big black bag and putting it on the table. "Better you should eat it than I." Maddie has a tendency to gain weight easily; I, on the other hand, worry about being too thin.

I eat the cake in gulps, showing her what a good cake I think she's made. This is one of my tricks, the older sister reinforcing her authority by bestowing approval, affirming the younger sister's faltering efforts. Maddie, undoubtedly wishing I'd take a more matter-of-fact tone, looks away from my nodding, churning face. "Incredible, isn't it," she says. "All these years and now Grace dies while she's away."

Our mother is farther away than she has ever been in her life, visiting a friend who has gone to live in Egypt, and we're not even sure she's received the telegram announcing her sister's death. She hadn't wanted to leave with Grace so sick; for the last month Grace has been lying in a coma, hearing, seeing nothing. "Go," Grace's children had told our mother. "She could continue like this for months, years. Certainly she doesn't know if you're here or five thousand miles away." So our mother had gone, worried about the heat in Cairo, about Grace slipping into death.

"Yet somehow fitting," I mumble to Maddie, without too much thinking what I am saying. Maddie gives me a quick look of comprehension and pulls up her mouth at one side to show she doesn't care. Immediately I am sorry, knowing I have touched the sore place between us. Fitting, I have said, that sisters should die so far from each other when they have spent their lives nearby. Fitting that the distance between them should at last, in the hour of death, be made concrete, measurable in miles.

Maddie and I are always signaling back and forth how easi-

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ly we can do without each other; and we do so in almost exact proportion as we are beguiled by a dream of sisters tenderly, eternally united, closer in sympathy to each other than to anyone else. Like potential lovers we are attracted and repelled by the promise of an intimacy that would shut out the world. We are fearful of finding ourselves enclosed in the spaces of childhood where all the old rivalries and exclusions and betrayals wait to rise up with their power to accuse and to hurt. But now, because I have made my claim, because it seems like a holiday to be sitting here in the sun with Maddie on a Friday morning, I want to open a door I would open to no one else. "Maddie," I will say. "Listen with me to the high note on the clarinet that is coming. Every day I wait for it. Does it make you think of anything? To me it's the last strained note of autumn, the final protest before the collapse into winter."

Maddie's eyes are deep green; when she looks at me over her tea the edges blur, light slanting straight through. No, I cannot say these things. As sisters, we are too intimate for confidences of this kind. Our knowledge of each other is too complete. Not only will she understand immediately what I hear in the note, she will also remember what my enthusiasms cost her childhood.

Now Maddie gets up to answer a knock at the door, I hear a shout and then Charlie's footsteps coming up the hall. Charlie's feet are too big for him. He flings them slightly out to the side when he walks, as if to get them out of the way. But at forty-three they are steadier than in his teens when they were always wobbling out of control. I get up to greet Charlie; he grabs me by the hair and pulls me forward to kiss my forehead. Then he jabs his finger at Maddie and shakes his head. "Trouble," he says. That's his name for Maddie. I am Disaster. I don't know what greeting he sends to Maddie on her birthday; to me he always sends a variation of the last. "Forty years ago this month, the German nation sent forth men of great vision to civilize France. In the process, these men traversed Belgium where on May twenty-eighth Leopold, King of the Belgians, stopped impeding their progress, thus making possible the enlightenment of his neighbor to the south. You must reflect that you were but one of the bright things that occurred on that memorable day."

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Charlie doesn't want to sit down or drink tea; he is impatient to leave. Maddie and I gather our coats and the sandwiches we are taking with us. Then we walk down the hall in single file, Maddie, Charlie, and myself.

"Get in," Charlie says, unlocking the doors of the car that is parked just outside the building. "Get in and roll down the windows. We're late."

"Relax, Charlie," Maddie replies. "You're getting all worked up."

When we were children Charlie had fits of temper that shook the house. He'd stick out his lower lip, narrow his eyes, then throw himself, shoulders first against a wall. Or he'd throw one of us if Maddie or I were near. Sometimes we'd liked to tease him. "Temper, temper," we'd chant, hopping around, keeping just out of reach. But often we'd provoke him, knowing he'd catch us.

Charlie looks at Maddie over the roof of the car and shakes his head. "Same old Maddie," he says, and she throws back at him an intensely sweet smile. But once we're rolling down Columbus Avenue on our way to the Lincoln Tunnel, we look around, at peace. In the cafés people are sitting coatless in the sun, talking, reading the paper. They are sprawled on the steps of dusty buildings, and rocking back and forth in chairs that have been placed, along with panels of stained glass and headboards of brass beds, in front of second hand furniture stores. We are all sitting in the front of the car, Maddie in the middle, and she and I gaze out the window. We pass Lincoln Center and just below it the plot of land with the placard announcing Fordham University. "Lombardy poplars," Maddie murmurs and we look together at the columns of green leaves shifting in the light. "I always forget," she continues, "how long they hold onto their leaves. And so green. Do they turn yellow before they fall?" But I can't remember and Charlie looks as if he hasn't heard.

We do not say what we are thinking: how strange for the three of us to find ourselves alone, no parents, spouses, children or friends to mute the edges of our old childhood isolation. Long ago we had despaired of trying to describe to other people the things that together we knew too well to mention: the smell of the sheets on our beds, the desolating music of the operas that our father listened to on the radio

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Saturday afternoons, the taste of rust on the back screen door. What these things had meant to each of us we didn't know, couldn't ask. They served merely as the backdrop of events we could more easily describe. But we didn't often try to talk about those either.

When Maddie and I tried to recall something from our childhood, we were usually left staring at each other in disbelief.

"What an awful Fourth of July that was, when I wouldn't speak to you because you'd left the sparklers out in the grass and it rained on them," one of us would say.

"That wasn't me, it was you who left them out. We'd bought them the day before and you wanted to light one and left the whole package under a tree. Don't you remember?"

With Charlie, efforts to recapture the past were more straightforward. "You must be talking about the ice storm of January, 1947," he'd say when I asked him if he remembered our mother making us stop midway through a snowbank so we could look undistracted at ice-coated branches glittering against a blue sky. "The telephone wires snapped and hung in the streets. None of the trains were running. Your father didn't go to work for a week."

That's how Charlie talked: "your father, your mother." When we were in our late teens and early twenties and went to the same parties, people overhearing us talk to each other would ask if we had different mothers and fathers. "Isn't your mother his, too?" Then it had seemed to me that Charlie was disowning me as his sister; but I had come to think differently. Charlie's passion was history. For him the past was intensely romantic, the present endurable only as it could be perceived from some distant perspective. When he said "your mother, your father" he was assuming the voice of either an anonymous ancestor or a hypothetical grandchild, speaking of our generation as if he hadn't belonged to it. He himself was of another time and place, a disembodied observer of our common experience.

Or perhaps it was only that Charlie, who loved facts, was acknowledging a simple one: parents are not the same parents to their different children.

"If the French and German military leave policies hadn't been so different during the First World War, Grace might

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have had a very different life," Charlie says, when we are in the middle of the Lincoln Tunnel.

Charlie, we know, expects us to look startled, but we are united in refusing to give him the satisfaction of a question. He waits until we have emerged into the flat noonday of New Jersey before he speaks again.

"Her life would have been very different."

Now that we know he will go on without requiring us to show interest, we can give it to him.

"Why is that, Charlie?" I ask.

"A question of numbers. The manpower needed by the Nazis was spawned while the German army of the First World War was on leave. The French army wasn't so successful in replacing its lost numbers in the next generation."

"You're telling us the French were outdone by the Germans?" Maddie asks.

"Well, to begin with, the French army didn't give leave as regularly as the German army. And when they did, the men were taken out of the lines, packed in muddy boxcars and sent back to Paris. They'd pick up some cheap wine in a canteen and by the time they got home they were drunk, dirty, a mess. I doubt their women were overjoyed at the sight of them. The German army, on the other hand, gave leave fairly often. And then the men were sent home shaved, in dress uniform. They travelled by boxcar, too. But if the cars had been used to carry horses, they cleaned them out before they packed the men in. Look at the comparative birth rates during the war years. You can see where the armies of twenty-five years later came from."

We are moving steadily down the New Jersey Turnpike. On one side the Newark airport rises uncertainly from beyond the marsh grasses; on the other, a plane is making a swift descent, its nose pointed straight at us.

"But what of Grace?" I ask Charlie, leaning forward to look at him.

"Can't hear you."

"Grace," Maddie yells. "Different life."

"Oh yes," Charlie says, as the plane sinks down on the other side of us. "If there hadn't been a war to disable Patrick, she wouldn't have been left alone all those years."

Charlie's logic is irrefutable, but it makes me twitch. "Sure

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she would have had a different life if there hadn't been a war. But so would we all. And why isolate just one cause? For the war, or for what happened to Grace?"

"That's the way I see it," Charlie replies. "Watch out for the exit to Metuchen."

I am jolted by the sound of a name I haven't heard for years.

"Oh, Charlie," I say, leaning across Maddie. "Did we visit Grace in Metuchen once and come back in a train full of soldiers?"

"Yes, your mother took us. Maddie, you stayed at home; I guess you were too little. We took a train back. It must have been late afternoon, December, January."

"The train was all lit up," I remember, "and it was dark outside. Everyone was laughing and talking. You went up and down the aisle telling the men how much they made a month because you had a little book, what was it called, that gave ranks and salaries and you could tell their ranks by looking at their uniforms."

"It was called a pay table. You were four and I was seven."

Maddie is staring straight ahead, excluded. "Never mind," I say to her silently. "I'll tell you what Charlie will never know. On that train I fell blindly in love for the first time. Nothing remains except the feel of his knee, the fresh smell of khaki. I had my arms around his leg, at first maybe to keep from falling. But the longer I held on, the harder I clung. It was the only place in the world I wanted to be. It was home. When the train started to slow down and I knew we'd have to get off, I thought no, I'll stay here, they can go without me. But when the train stopped I got off without a word because I was too proud to let anyone know. I can remember walking down the platform, soldiers everywhere, hugging my desolation to myself. Do you remember the first time for you?"

Maddie continues to stare blankly out the window. We haven't exchanged a word.

McGinnis' Funeral Home has a parking lot in the back and we get out of the car, leaving our coats inside. Scattered over the pebbles are leaves from the maple and tulip trees surrounding the old house. We hesitate a moment before going in. The sun is warm, the sky is blue. "In the city, the sky never looks like that," Maddie says, tilting her face to the sun.

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Charlie is putting on his tie. "Patrick died on October twelfth, Columbus Day. The difference of a month. Most of the leaves must have been on the trees then."

We look up through the mesh of branches. The maples are almost entirely bare. On the tulip trees spikey pods glint among the last flat leaves, ragged yellow. Beyond, expanses of blue open before our upturned faces. Like the eye of a camera, I think, and remember the old photograph of Grace and our mother when they were children.

Two of Grace's daughters are at the door to take us by the hand as we enter. Their eyes are drenched in light, just as when we played cards together on the floor. One of them asks us how long it took to drive down while the other looks eagerly into our faces. "Oh, yes, Charlie," she says. "You're just the same." She seems less sure of Maddie and me. I feel shy, suddenly; when I look obliquely in Maddie's direction I catch her doing the same in mine. "But come in," she says, and we follow her down a hall into a large room in front.

Nobody looks to the end of the room where the open coffin stands banked with flowers. Instead we join Grace's other children in a corner, exclaiming in low voices. "Why have we let so much time go by," we say; "hardly any distance at all, it would be so easy." It has probably never occurred to any of us to try to see the others and I have listened without interest to passing news of these cousins: marriages, babies, divorce. Yet we are in earnest now. How have we lived our entire adult lives without each other? With a quick gesture one of Grace's daughters crosses her hands in front of her, and Maddie stares. I know she has been startled by the memory of Grace's broad, sensitive fingers.

Charlie nods to Maddie and me that it is time. Slowly we move toward the coffin, Maddie and I holding back a little in protest to Charlie's taking charge. I am about to put my arm through Maddie's but stop when I see her face. When Maddie is moved, her eyes widen with amazement and her mouth slides up at one corner. She does not like to be touched then. I know to keep my distance. But now, whether it is the heavy scent of chrysanthemums, or Charlie standing there with his bottom lip stuck out a little, or the glimpse of Grace's face which in death has finally lost its chill, Maddie raises one arm and rests it across my shoulders. "Poor Grace," she whispers

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so quietly I don't know if she means for me to hear. "That's what she was always called. But why?"

After the funeral Maddie and I take the train back to New York because Charlie is going on to visit friends in Washington. He drives us to the station and we talk briefly while waiting for the train.

"Grace would have hated that, the open coffin," Maddie says. "She didn't like people to come see her even when she was sick. But she would have liked your being one of the pallbearers, Charlie. She was fond of you."

Charlie bows. "What you mean is we were both fond of our own ways."

"Yes, I mean that too. And she would have enjoyed the sun in the cemetery, the feel of it on her back. It was almost hot."

"Almost a day in September," I say, "except that the ground was hard."

We catch sight of the train coming down the tracks.

"By the way," Charlie says. "You heard the soprano sing 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' as we carried the coffin out of the church?"

We nod at him.

" 'The trumpet that shall never call retreat.' That was for Grace."

Maddie and I look at him expectantly but the train is pulling in and Charlie rapidly kisses each of us on the forehead without seeming to notice. "Hurry up," he says. "Get on."

As we are going up the steps he calls after us. "An abolitionist tune before the Civil War. Became a marching song for the Union Army."

We turn to wave and the train jolts forward. "Your mother's grandfather marched to it. A drummer boy, fourteen years old in 1861."

Charlie straightens his shoulders and turns one foot at a right angle in our direction, then clicks the other one closed. He faces us, his eyes expressionless. Then, as the train gathers speed, he gravely raises his hand to his forehead in a salute.

On the train going back to New York, Maddie and I talk very little. The car is almost empty. It is too early for people

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going into the city for the evening or returning home after work. We choose a broad leather seat for three. Maddie puts her bag on the seat between us and takes out the sandwiches we have been carrying around all day, waiting to eat. The winter solstice is only a month away, we remark. Now that the sun is in the west the fields of marsh grass look cold. Between bites I tell Maddie how walking home the other night I had suddenly caught sight of the full moon suspended between two buildings. It made me stop where I was. Then while I hesitated, waiting, a long formation of Canada geese passed over its face. The street was so quiet, the city so still, that from far away I could hear their faint honking as they flew south to warmth.

Soon Maddie falls asleep to the slow jostling of the train and I pick up the morning paper that someone has left on the seat in front of us. No news there, I think, briefly turning its pages. Then I put it down and idly stare, past Maddie, out the window. The sun is turning red. In the distance the flames from the oil refineries stand out against the darkening sky. Maddie's head, framed by the window, looks smaller, more compact. As it rocks back and forth against the seat her hair is coming unpinned, slipping in a coil down her neck. Her hands are lying palms up on either side of her, empty. I wonder when it was, the last time I saw Maddie asleep, and think how that made the great difference in living with someone: you saw them sleep. Then I remember a Sunday afternoon twenty years ago when I had watched Maddie sleeping.

We had gone to the same college for one year. On that afternoon she had come to the room in the library where she knew I studied to ask if I would look over an essay on *King Lear* she had to hand in the next day. The room was empty, except for us, and we sat on a leather sofa, a little embarrassed to be close together in an unaccustomed place. Through the long windows that looked on a cluster of birch trees we could see that it had begun to snow. Perhaps it would continue all night. We said how glad we were there was no Cordelia in our family, how it would be a strain, having a sister like that. Then, when we had finished with the essay, I picked up the book I had been reading. I thought Maddie was reading, too, and looked up suddenly to see her

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asleep, mouth wide open, essay in hand, her head falling backward at rest against the slippery leather. Till death, Maddie, I vowed, my heart tightening with pity and love. But in the next breath I asked her forgiveness, knowing how intolerable it was, the condescension in my love.

Maddie wakes up as the train is pulling into Penn Station. Quickly she loops her hair into a knot and fastens it to the back of her head. We gather our coats and walk toward the door at the end of the car so we can get off as soon as the train stops. Maddie is going to take a crosstown bus, and I am going uptown on the Broadway Express. Each of us will soon be home. We stand sideways together in the aisle, facing the window. Outside, in the tunnel, lights sweep slowly past in the darkness. Maddie is a little dazed from sleep; looking at her reflection in the window I think she must be dreaming still. For a minute I lose myself in the rhythmic sway of light, in the slow clatter of wheels. Then, gradually, I become aware that Maddie, staring straight ahead, is looking at me. In the instant before the train jolts to a stop we exchange a reflected look: intimate, defiant, sustained. Then we pull our coats around our shoulders and walk out onto the platform where we smile and part.

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HERBERT LOMAS

# Down the Hill

A curtain of dusty sunlight in the street.
I walk through it down the hill
From Exchange Station to the Kardomah caff.
Sheila Banks still
In my heart inhales the steam: somewhat—
With her cup clasped—like a squirrel with a nut.

She looks at me across the rim and smiles,
Yielding and secret, failed nun,
Ex-schizophrenic, cured consumptive,
Who held my hand for fun
One afternoon at the pictures, and gave a bang
To my surprised heart, since I was young.

She tried to make me a Catholic, taking advantage
Of what she'd done. Suffering was exquisite,
Sent for our grace, she said, so felt no guilt
For giving me so much of it;
And fell in love with my friend and followed him
Meek-eyed, alert for his every whim.

He didn't care for her and thought her rather
Daft, could mimic her quite well,
Enjoyed his victory over me,
Was flattered by our little duplex hell.
Pain was a shame he knew, for he was vexed
By only loving his own sex.

We were a little crocodile from Chekhov: he
Impassioned for a blond unaware
Medical student about to be married,
I in love with her,

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And she with him: I don't know where
They are now—and know too well to care.

Here's all the delivery of that blaze
Without the flame: a little pain
Which new suffering has raised,
Exquisitely sought out again.
Will they too go on living if we meet
Behind the curtain of dusty sunlight in the street?

## With the Pike Behind Her

The end of the expedition:
Brown eyes, like a fox's, keep
Their unbeatable lookout, not quite
Human, retreating under light,
Hearing perfect, but I thought she was asleep.

A hand crabs out from the bedclothes,
And I hold it: slightly moist meat, a crone's
Fingers, blotched in red, a forehead grown
Like Shakespeare's, greying at the roots, knobs
Protruding hideously from her collar bones.

I sit quietly and pray: what comes
Is her spry person, in her kitchen frying,
Smiling in the mountain house above Shaw Wood,
With the great Pike behind her through the glooms,
Making me feel needed without trying.

She knows I'm here—asking about my children—
Who's looking after me tonight?
And: "Don't you know anything, then?"
So I tell her what I know—a mite
To a strappadoed body: all that's trite.

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How children often nag each other raw,
An ill-matched affectionate couple, both mules,
And flibbertigibbets; that my mother-in-law's
Married at nearly seventy—nice deal;
And what we think of their schools.

Fastidious as I am, I bend to kiss
Her damp forehead. Leaving, I acquiesce
In death, blowing kisses to brown eyes.
She says, "I've been listening to a lovely story"—
Blowing me kisses back, more like a mistress.

And all the time we're talking, outside a window
Some children and a dog or two
Are laughing, barking, with a bouncing ball
In a sunny park, in a bubble of light, all
Hanging like a bathysphere in the dark blue.

## Mother Skin

That arctic fox my mother used to drape
Around her bosom seemed to snuggle in
Its tail, nipped with a clip beneath its chin.
She'd fluff it up and nestle it round her nape
And over her pearls and cleavage, scented shapes
Like the brylcreemed bowler father brushed with firm
And cleansing swipes before she took his arm.
I loved my parents through these smells and drapes.

Furs and hats are soft and hard, furs speak
Of mother skin—any fur will bring a reek
Of powder, graze the cheek, though never actual.
Smelly monsters every infant breeds
Make for a hundred hairy grown-up greeds,
Though furs have meat stripped out and bite their tails.

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# How I Love My Sister

My sister was never born.
She came out of the horn
Of plenty and back through the horn.

All my life I've been unexpectedly drawn
To my sister, who was never born.
You could say I've missed her.

Even as a tot I slipped my hand
Up her skirt, a search not planned
But urgent for her tender hand.

I also adored her and didn't dare
To touch her dazzling skin or face her stare
That watched me from some little girl's hair.

She was very close to God and is,
And so I'm dumb as I come to her school
And will always behave like a fool.

I think she's my twin,
And she's often led me into sin.
But I've had to let her escape
Back to her city of crape.

Friendship is perhaps the most
I can hope from her blonde ghost
If I want her to be a happy one,
And dark girls lead me on.

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ALICE BLOOM

# On a Greek Holiday

Once or so a summer we do an ordinary—which is to say frantic, standardized, and expensive—American thing with the children. At 5:30 on a week night we hit the supermarket, then Sears for something dull but crucial like a mattress pad and a supply of vacuum cleaner bags, then supper at the Burger King or its equivalent, and then the early movie at the Mall. By the end of the evening we're all, children especially, a bit wan with the strain of being caught up smiling in this family commercial, and we're relieved when it's over. Last night was this summer's night, and after the double cheeseburgers with bacon and the chicken-fat mocha malts, we go on to Cinema 1-2-3-4 and pay $3.50 apiece for four children to re-see "E.T.," and, for the sake of the scenery of blue, white, and ochre which the ads claim it "glorifies," we go into this summer's older-adolescent mild-porn film, shot in Greece, called "Summer Lovers."

Like most fantasies, this movie has more action and less description than occur in actual life, but aside from this quibble, I enjoyed it immensely, all of it, not only because we were just there, in Greece, in the blue, white and ochre a few weeks ago, but also because I had never seen a movie of this kind before. I was not allowed to attend this sort of movie or indeed, seldom allowed to attend any movie at all in the summers of my own early adolescent years, on the grounds that one caught polio at the movies, and from wearing what we then called "tennis shoes," and from swimming in public pools. Therefore I, and many of my best friends, were deprived of the three fatal elements that continue to make up the persistent teen dream: love without adults, proper and sufficient gear, and the unlimited public pool.

Since the time when I longed for them, love, gear, and the public pool have been considerably fleshed out, both in life and in the movies. "Summer Lovers" is a reliable example be-

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cause although it has a modern application—three young lovers instead of the classical two—it remains otherwise true to the ancient pattern, sometimes painted on Greek urns in fact, in which Spring/Youth/Fertility prevails at last against Old Man/Winter/Authority/Society/Parent with his heavy, arbitrary, laughable rules, foolish old-fashioned iron grip, long-gone beauty, and his one foot in the long-deserved grave.

The public pool of dreams today is far beyond the Malibu beach parties which was the extent of what we, my friends and I, in our one-piece pink-checked gingham suits with ruffles on the derriere and flowered swimming caps to match, could possibly, back in the 1950s in the simmering, flat, corny Midwest, imagine. According to "Summer Lovers" the public pool is now the radiant, crowded, nude beaches of Greece. And the fantasy of love without adults, which to our minds was double-dating at the drive-in, is now having your parents give you and your boyfriend a several-hundred-dollar-a-week sea-view apartment for two months on the island of Santorini for a graduation present rather than, say, a demure Bulova with two tiny diamonds and a card that begins "We're proud of you today." According to this movie, teen gear, to be proper and sufficient these days, must include a Rolex, a Nikon, a leather case of lenses, a complete darkroom (in the apartment on the island), enough changes of American play clothes to sink a freighter, running shoes in every color and number of stripe, a Martin guitar, a bright orange Citroën "Pony," a hardback copy of *Nice Girls Do* on the bedside table, and a nice second girl you can pick out with your expensive binoculars from your terrace who is sitting with her binoculars on her terrace picking you out from across the way until, that is, this silent but potent flirtation ends and she packs up her gear (portable stereo system, library of art books, clothes) and moves in with you—Nice Girl Number One, and Boy. And love without adults is a suddenly blissful, innocent, uncomplicated, defiantly pastoral threesome; and permanent (for the summer, hence the title) fun: at the discos, the souvlaki stands, the cafés, the shops, on the nude beaches, and on the water bed.

About five or ten minutes into the film, before this second girl turns up, and after such bits of dialogue as "Gee, it's like a dream, Michael," and, "Well, sure, freedom means you'll

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get hurt now and then," and, "My mother is so uptight she didn't even want us to live together," it's clear there's not much to be milked from the plot of a mere twosome. Their situation involves so little struggle—shall we take the Citroën or the bus to the beach, which beach?—that they are nearly Jamesian in their untroubled purity, their freedom from life's coarser issues of survival. Not that this frees them for talk and feeling and talk about feeling. Presented to us as, apparently, congenitally unable to converse, they do the next obvious thing: they enlarge the cast. If two is fun, three will be more so, so the plot of the movie is this: will three work out? Of course it will, this is 1982, so this hardly keeps us on the edge of our Cinema 4 seats, but it does allow for the camera to keep turning.

The action of binocular gazing back and forth then goes about as far as it can sustain itself, so Boy is suddenly made to meet Girl Two, accidentally, on the way to the (nude) beach. Girl One is out, alone, with her Nikon, photographing the natives engaged in genre activities such as mending fishing nets or sitting in the sun, smiling. Girl Two and Boy haven't formally met, that is, they don't yet know each other's first names, but he spots her walking towards the bus, he brakes and abandons the orange "Pony," and joins her on the jam-packed trip to the beach.

There are only about two exchanges during the bus-ride. He says, "I had the car. Why didn't you let me drive you? Why did you want to take the bus?" To which she replies, "I like people." Here, and elsewhere throughout the movie, it's the camera that provides the eloquence, if not to say the content, and at this point the camera is speaking from two vantage points: one at belly button level, shooting into the public bus-load of bouncing, eager, stand-up flesh on its way to the sun and sand, can't wait, and the other angle on intensely close-up faces of Boy and Girl Two, all eyes and lips. No more dialogue from them, as I recall, until they and their fellow (no Greeks, though) bus riders have disembarked, run onto the beach past the wooden, hand-lettered sign that states: "Absolutely forbidden to Camping or the Nakedness," and stripped, and arranged themselves, like old village women stretching out laundry, onto the oven-hot pebbles.

After long shot of the now simmering, ecstatic beach scene,

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camera fastens on Girl Two's face. She's flat on her back, saying nothing, looking rather prissy in fact, eyes closed, seriously sunbathing. Then camera on his face, saying nothing, but eyes open, glittering, staring down at her, and looking as full of uncomprehending wonder as if he had just discovered fire. The shot is so close we can see, reflected in his pupils, the individual beads of sun oil on her naked brown skin. At last he says, "What do you do all day?" And the camera shifts to the level of the sand alongside her bare stomach, shooting up at her face. She replies, eyes suddenly open, and hostile, suspicious: "Why do you ask such a question like this?" (She's French, it turns out later, so her syntax is a little stilted.) "I want to get to know you, that's all," he says, abashed. "Well, the first thing to know about me is that I don't like personal questions," she answers, and recloses her eyes and slightly flares her nostrils, a signal that she, anyway, is back to the serious, it not to say superior, business of what we came to the beach for—sunbathing, not these questions.

Like Tiresias, only the camera knows. Boy doesn't know, and he ponders this reprimand, one can tell by his now-clouded eyes. And audience doesn't know: we're left with the old-fashioned difficulty of making art make sense, and we're trying to resolve the apparent contradiction between the grunted proprieties of the sparse, stiff dialogue, their two, blurred, very private faces in the background, and the foreground shot of her nipples which fill the front of the screen like a moonscape.

Heavily clad in our sopping gingham suits we lay, my friends and I, eyes closed against the sting of chlorine, by the side of the concrete pool dug out of the corn fields and, tired of graceless flirtations with pimply, wet, large-footed boys, fantasized about "personal questions" someday, and someday, nakedness too, probably. Now, stark naked, the camera explains this repeatedly, nameless to each other (our parents all knew each other on Main Street, and at church), these new teens fantasize, it seems, about graceless flirtations, about ordinary yucking it up, the titillation of binocular gazing, a little hot pebble put down the back of your suit by some dumb boy, coy sparring talk as antiquated as sword play. To us, nakedness would be, if and when it happened, full of awful sig-

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nificance, not at all in the Greek idea of the natural electric body under a democratic sun. We were scrupulously careful not to be caught by each other, girls, in the showers after gym, even that much was mortifying, one just instinctively didn't do it, not even in underwear, a momentary bad dream taken from that large dream of ultimate mortification, naked on the street downtown, in English class, at a dance.

And nakedness meant sexy, sex, pure and simple, with an unmet special someone someday in private. I don't believe that I, we, even thought it could be otherwise; certainly we never thought of public nakedness as possible or desirable, or in terms of health, mental or physical, or in terms of liberation, or as a statement, or politics, or as the opposite of being uptight, or as natural, because we didn't even have that vocabulary, or, indeed, any vocabulary that limned for us our "rights." Things grated, but we never thought, never talked of what our "rights" might be, against parents or friends' parents or teachers or deans or housemothers or the general public of adults, required courses, music lessons, skirts, required hats on Sunday, much less of our "rights" in connection with our own ideas and bodies with which we were, anyway, uniformly disgruntled. We didn't know anybody who went anywhere for a graduation present, and about what our parents paid for was summer camp or vacations in the family car, with them. Plots, though, we had, plenty of plots.

The movie doesn't tell why Girl Two prissily uncovers her body but resents "personal questions." She does a respectable thing with her "day," she even has a snappy khaki safari outfit to do it in, and her own Rolex. She's an archaeologist, employed on a dig, and she does things every day like find perfectly intact vases with paintings on them of the Minotaur in the Labyrinth, and it's not immediately clear why she couldn't just say that. But as the movie reels on, it does become clear that the three main characters (everyone else is employed as scenery) assiduously, punctiliously avoid what one might think was actually a rather benign, polite, even public sort of question, such as "What is your last name?" or, "Where are you from?" or, "And what sort of work do you do?" None of the three has a criminal record, none is on the lam, yet such questions, the dialogue grudgingly explains now and then,

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would be a kind of unthinkable violation of privacy, an intimacy that might ruin the happiness of three in a bed. Knowing last names might lead to complications, a possibility at which they shudder and which is as potentially mortifying to them as were the old nightmares of nakedness in public for us. Complications, we would have died for; and our plots were dreamed in order to have, in the future, as many complications as possible.

The Midwest, planted in rows of towns and zinnias and soy beans and railroad tracks straight into the horizon, with a life so thinly and recently there, so shallow it seems as though the dry wind will knock the cemetery stones right over, is the steppes of America, and if one is born there, one is born into a mild sense of exile from a real place. Everything else, all that feels as though it would be thick and delicate—towers, small lights, wet anonymous streets, old parks with secrets, passing conversations, gardens with aged lilacs, austere sensitive rooms where verse is written, a bouquet of crowds, lives, ages, questions, odd clothes, languages, stories, plots—seems impossibly, inhumanly in the future, and when I finally reached an age of action, all other places were news.

The idea of other places was derived from literature, and when I got there, Chicago was via Frank Norris, and New York by way of almost any Thomas Wolfe sentence, and New England sprung pristine from the tall, washed foreheads of Hawthorne, Melville, and Sarah Orne Jewett. This latter image was a pure but lasting association, drawn from literary photographs in which the foreheads of Midwestern writers wear a perpetual scowl, as though they had continually to watch out for abuses from mayors and Methodists, but the foreheads of New England writers are lonely coastlines from which the tide of thought has just receded. The first images of Greece, along these impressionable lines, were through pencils stamped with Venus de Milo, then through the words "Ionic," "Doric," and "Corinthian" in spelling contests, then from a field trip with the Latin Club to see Judith Anderson play *Medea*; then, finally, before actually getting there, through Aristotle and Henry Miller, through Freud, Sophocles, Edith Hamilton, Moses Hadas, Isadora Duncan, Gerald

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and Lawrence Durrell, Kazantzakis, George Seferis, Cavafy, Sappho, Heraclitus and, a lifetime of pictures: blue, white, and ochre.

All these were lovers and not salesmen. They only inadvertently described me, and what I longed for. Their passion was for a land. For the reason of this kind of introduction, I suppose, I am unable to "go on a vacation." To borrow the parlance of travel ads, I don't go to "get away," I go to get into. In addition to following their love—lovers of place being such a trustworthy sort, an enviable sort—one travels not to enjoy oneself, or to repeat oneself, or to cosset oneself, or—past a certain age—to find oneself, but to find the distinctly other. That other, that is there, and is loved. The only interesting question on a trip for me is—what sustains life elsewhere? How deep does it go? Can one see it? This hope, this anticipation, is forcibly blocked. Henry Miller, in 193—, stood in Epidaurus, alone, in a "weird solitude," and felt the "great heart of the world beat." We stand at Epidaurus with several thousand others, some of whom are being called "my chickens" by their tour guide who calls herself "your mother hen," whose counterpart, this time at Delphi, explains several times that what is being looked at is the "bellybutton of the world, okay? The Greeks thought, this is the bellybutton of the world, okay?" "These stones all look alike to me," someone grumbles. There is no help for it; we're there with guidebooks ourselves; but this fact—tourism is big business—and others, throw us back, unwilling, into contemplation of our own dull home-soul, our dull bodily comforts, our own dull dwindling purse, our own dull resentments; because the other—in this case, Greece—is either rapidly disappearing or else, self-protective, is retreating so far it is disappeared. You can get there, but you can't get at it.

For instance, a study of travel posters and brochures, which in the process of setting dates and buying tickets always precedes a trip, shows us, by projection into these pictured, toothy, tourist bodies, having some gorgeous piece of ingestion: the yellow beach, the mossy blue ruin, a dinner table laden with food and red wine of the region, dancing, skiing, golfing, shopping, waving to roadside natives as our rented car sails by, as though we only go to play, as though all we do

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here at home is work, as though, for two or four weeks abroad, we seek regression.

Also in the posters, but as part of the landscape, there are the natives—whether Spanish, Greek, Irish, etc.—costumed as attractions, performing in bouzouki or bag-pipe bands, or doing some picturesque and nonindustrial piece of work such as fishing, weaving, selling colorful cheap goods in open-air markets, herding sheep or goats. The journey promised by the posters and brochures is a trip into everyone's imaginary past: one's own, drained of the normal childhood content of fear, death, space, hurt, abandonment, perplexity, and so forth, now presented as the salesmen think we think it should have been: one in which we only ate, slept, and played in the eternal sun under the doting care of benevolent elders.

And we are shown the benevolent elders, the imaginary natives who also, for a handsome fee, exist now, in the present of the trip we are about to take. ("Take" is probably a more telling verb here than we think.) They exist in a past where they are pictured having grown cheerfully old and wise doing only harmless, enjoyable, pre-industrial, clean, self-employed, open-air work, in pink crinkled cheeks, merry eyes, and wonderful quaint clothes, with baskets, nets, toy-shaped boats, flower boxes, cottages, sheep crooks, country roads, whitewashed walls, tea shop signs, and other paraphernalia of the pastoral wish. I have never seen a travel poster showing natives of the country enjoying their own food or beaches or ski-jumps or hotel balconies; nor have I ever seen a travel poster showing the natives working the night-shift in the Citroën factory, either.

The natives in the posters (are they Swiss, Mexican, Chilean, Turkish models?) are happy parent figures, or character dolls, and their faces, like the faces of the good parents we are supposed to have dreamed, show them pleased with their own lot, busy but not too busy with a job that they obviously like, content with each other, and warmly indulgent of our need to play, to be fed good, clean food on time, and to be tucked into a nice bed at the end of our little day. They are the childhood people that also existed in early grammar-school readers, and nowhere else: adults in your neighbor-

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hood, in the identifiable costumes of their humble tasks, transitional-object people, smiling milkman, friendly aproned store-owner in his small friendly store, happy mailman happy to bring your happy mail, happy mommy, icons who make up a six-year-old's school-enforced dream town, who enjoy doing their nonindustrial, unmysterious tasks: mail, milk, red apple, cooky, just for you, so you can learn to decipher: See, Jip, see.

A travel remark I have always savored came from someone surprised in love for a place, just returned from a month in the Far East (no longer tagged "the mysterious," I've noticed), and who was explaining this trip at a party. She said, "I just loved Japan. It was so authentic and Oriental." Few people would go quite so naked as that, but the charm of her feelings seemed just right. Perhaps she had expected Tokyo to be more or less a larger version of the Japanese Shop in the Tokyo Airport. It is somewhat surprising that she found it to be anything much more.

One of the hushed-tone moral superiority stories, the aren't-we-advanced stories told by those lucky enough to travel in Soviet Russia, has to do with that government's iron management of the trip. There are people who can't be met, buildings that can't be entered, upper story windows that can't be photographed, streets that can't be strolled, districts that can't be crossed, cities in which it is impossible to spend the night, and so on. However, our notions of who we are and what comforts we demand and what conditions we'll endure, plus any country's understandably garbled versions of who we are, what we want, and what we'll pay for, are far more rigid than the strictures of any politburo because such strictures don't say "This is you, this is what you must want," but "This is what you can't, under any circumstances, do." That, though it inhibits movement, and no doubt in some cases prevents a gathering of or understanding of some crucial or desired bit of information, has at least the large virtue of defining the tourist as potentially dangerous. What we meet most of the time, here and abroad, is a definition of ourselves as harmless, spoiled babies, of low endurance and little information, minimal curiosity, frozen in infancy, frozen

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in longing, terrified for our next square meal and clean bed, and whose only potential danger is that we might refuse to be separated from our money.

Suppose, for a moment, that tourism—the largest "industry" in Greece (it employs, even more than shipping, the most people)—were also the largest industry in America. Not just in Manhattan or Washington D.C. or Disneyland or Disneyworld or at the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls, but in every motel, hotel, restaurant, in every McDonald's and Colonel Sanders and Howard Johnson's and Mom & Pop's, in every bar and neighborhood hang-out, truck stop, gas station, pharmacy, department store, museum, church, historical site, battleground, in every taxi, bus, subway, train, plane, in every public building, in post offices and banks and public bathrooms, on every street in every city, town, village and hamlet from West Jonesport, Maine to Centralia, Illinois, to Parachute, Colorado and every stop in between and beyond, just as it is in Greece: tourists.

Suppose that every other business establishment across the country therefore found it in their best interest to become a souvenir shop, selling cheap, mass-produced "gifts" for the tourists to take back home that, back home, would announce that they had visited America. What images would we mass produce for them? Millions of little bronzed Liberty Bells? Tepees? St. Louis Arches? Streetcars named "Desire"? Statues of Babe Ruth? of Liberty? of Daniel Boone? In Greece we saw miniature bottles of ouzo encased in tiny plastic replicas of the temple of Athena Nike. Could we do something so clever, and immediately recognizable, with miniatures of bourbon? Encase them in tiny plastic Washington Monuments? Lincoln Memorials? Would we feel misrepresented?

Third, suppose that a sizable portion of these tourists wanting gifts, toilets, rooms, baths, meals, dollars, film, drinks, stamps, directions, are Greek; or else, let us suppose that we assumed, that whether actually Greek or not, wherever they come from they speak Greek as a second language. Assume, therefore, that our map and traffic and road signs, postings of instruction and information, advertisements, timetables, directions—"stop," "go," "hot," "cold," "men," "women,"

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"open," "closed," "yes," "no,"—to name a few rudiments of life, plus all the menus in all those sandwich counters, truck stops, fast-food outlets, lunch rooms, and so forth, had to be in Greek as well as in English. We have never been, so far, an occupied country, whether by forces enemy or not. Undoubtedly, if we were, as an ongoing fact of our "in-season" summer months, we Americans, having to offer our multitudinous wares in Greek, would come up with items as hilarious as those we collected from the English side of Greek menus: baygon and egs. Xamberger steake. Veat. Orange juise. Rost beef. Shrimp carry. Potoes. Spaggeti. Morcoroni. And our favorite, Fried Smooth Hound. (This turned out to be a harmless local fish, much to the disappointment of our children, born surrealists.)

Suppose that we had to post Bar Harbor, Plum Island, Chincoteague, Key West, Bay St. Louis, Galveston, Big Sur and Seattle beaches with "No Nakedness Allowed" signs, but that the Greeks and other tourists, freed from the cocoons of air-conditioned tour buses, armed with sun-oil in every degree of protection, rushed beachwards past the signs and stripped to their altogether, anyway? Would our police sit quietly in the shade and drink with other men and turn, literally, their khaki-clad rumps to the beach, as did the Greek police?

And food. Suppose we had to contrive to feed them, these hungry hordes? They will come here, as we go there, entrenched in their habits and encumbered with fears of being cheated, fears of indigestion, of recurrent allergies, of breaking their diets, of catching American trots, of being poisoned by our water, fattened by our grease and starch, put off by our feeding schedules, sickened by something weird or local. Suppose we decided, out of some semi-conscious, unorganized, but national canniness, that what these tourists really want is our cobbled version of their national foods. Whom will we please: the English who want their teas at four, or the Italians who want supper at nine at night? Or both? And what will we cook and serve, and how will we spell it?

Or suppose they want to eat "American" food. What tastes like us? What flavors contain our typicality, our history, our heroes, our dirt, our speeches, our poets, our battles, our na-

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tional shames? The hot dog? Corn on the cob? I have eaten, barring picnics and occasional abstention, probably about 130 meals in Greece. And Greek food, I feel somewhat qualified to say, contains their history, and tastes of sorrow and triumph, of olive oil and blood, in about equal amounts. It is the most astounding and the most boring food that I, an eater, have ever eaten.

Greek food is tragic. Why? Because each bite is a chomp into history, our history. Why? Because this lunch—small fish, cheese, olives, wine, bread—exactly this lunch, and tomorrow's lunch—fish, cheese, olives, wine, bread—has been eaten since the time of the glory that will someday be called Greece, the glory that existed for a moment, the glory that Greece was, and the glory that mankind—for Greece *is* that, not Greek, but mankind—might yet be. Each bite is archaeological, into fine layers of millennia: fish, oil, cheese, wine, bread—in the partaking we join, on the back of the tongue, Amazon forces and single crazy saints, mythical men who married their mythical mothers, and men, and mothers, who today and tomorrow only dream of it.

One uses a big word like "timeless" with caution, if at all. But there is nothing timely about two things in Greece; therefore it is not rhetorical to claim that, in Greece, the quality of the heat of the sun on the skin and the quality of the food in the mouth are perhaps as close as we can come to the taste of "timelessness." Along with the oldest human question—how can we make God happy?—this sun and this food are among the most ancient sensations recorded.

Under this summer sun every meal, beginning with breakfast, is eaten in 100 degrees of heat and hotter—115, 120—by afternoon. The meal, any one of them, is composed of food that grows best in this climate and yet is entirely unsuited to it as daily refreshment. No one could possibly, certainly not a tourist, need this oil-soaked food for fuel in mid-July. It tastes and feels, though, like fuel: heavy, shiny, slow-moving food, purple, brown, red: tomatoes, eggplants, fish, lamb, olives, black wine, blinding white cheese, much bread. We eat this three times a day; three times a day the tourists eat it and the Greeks eat it. Everyone seems to look forward to the next meal, and all around our table, where we eat again with rel-

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ish, are others eating with relish, sometimes even with a look of reprieve and relief. And there is no escape from it. Who would risk whatever "shrimp carry" might be? There is no ordering something else—a salad of lettuce for a change, or a thin chicken sandwich. There is nothing but this food with its taste and texture of ancient days, of old crimes, forbidden loves, of something tinny and resigned, something of both gluttony and renunciation.

In addition to being a tragic cuisine, a sacramental cuisine, it is also practical, cheap, crude, and uninventive. The raw materials are without equal: eggplants hang with the burnish of Dutch interiors; the fish still flap as they are headed oilwards; the lamb chop's mother befouls the yard next to your table; fruit so perfect, so total, that the scent of a single peach in a paper bag perfumes the whole room overnight and brings tears of love of God to the eyes. On a walk into the hills, meadows of thyme and mint and basil are idly crushed under heel. What happens to all this in the pot is a miracle of transformation, of negligence or brutality; or possibly, stubborn evidence of some otherwise lost political knowledge of what draws out the best, most noble, and most beautiful in the masses.

For the food is destroyed, each meal, in the process from vine or net or garden to violent table. Its facts are these: it has always been eaten thus, with the exception of the late-coming tomato. It is—lamb, eggplant, olive, fish, white cheese—even now, perfectly indigenous. It is plain cooking. It is cooked for hours, all day; oil is poured on without restraint, discretion, or mercy. Every morsel is the same temperature and consistency by the time it reaches the palate. In a profound way, it is stupid food, overfeeding the flesh while tasting as though one should renounce the flesh forever.

We did not, to be fair, eat in a single Greek home. However, we were careful to eat where the Greeks ate, and the Greeks eat out—in family groups, starched, ironed, slicked-down heads, whited summer shoes, strictly disciplined children; or in tense, dark groups of greedy, hasty men; which is how, as families or as men, the Greeks travel through the day. From the second-story, open-air, Greek-family-filled restaurant where we ate most of our meals while on the island,

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we could, if we had a table near the edge, throw our bread scraps, if we had any left over, straight down into the blue-green sea for the melon and dove-colored fish to mouth; and we could watch the evening sky turn from the day's bleached-out white to a pale English blue, then to lime-green streaked with apricot, and finally, with the fall of night, to a grape-purple that rose, in that instant, up from the sea.

Without the heat on the skin, without the food in the mouth, there is no hope of understanding the poetry of Greece. I am not talking of the possibility of reading it in the original, but of understanding the poetry in translation, in English, or French, or whatever one normally speaks and reads. Seferis, Sikelianos, Pappas, Yannis Ritsos, Odysseus Elytis: whatever their differences, all write poems of home-sickness, of celebration, of sorrow for the land, of the comradeliness of the common denominators of war, occupation, loss, burnt-out villages, lost youth, old simplicity, brotherhood, and always—the longing for the sea, the sun, and for the grace of shared food: bread, wine, cheese, olives. A line from the poem "Lost Incorruptibility," by Pandelis Prevelakis, for instance—"The sun of Greece no longer bakes / on my lips the bread of poetry"—is not a thought, in any language, but the rendering of an absolute physical sensation; but also, not one that is universal: he means Greek sun, that bread, and no other. After feeling the two, the sun and the bread, for only 130 meals, no other is ever strong enough again.

Nor, without that exhausting strength, is there any hope of understanding the sinuous, tearful, hectic music which plays—or rather, which is played—on the island's several public jukeboxes, at top volume, not during the day, but all night until close to dawn, when it stops so abruptly, the silence wakes you up, as though the real function of the music, through the black night, was to act as an insistent, imploring, coaxing prayer, ensuring the sun's return. If, and when, it does, we will eat again.

Day after stupefying day, for our weeks on the island, we drown ourselves in the heat of the beaches. These public beaches—two or three of them—are intermittently bitten into

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the rocks and woods encircling the island. To get to them, since there are few roads, one must catch one of the daily taxi boats, converted fishing boats now fitted up with wooden benches and gay awnings, which bob and toot and whistle in the town's main harbor early each morning. The half-hour ride costs less than a dollar, and the boat putts its polyglot cargo round to St. Patros or further, to the Paradise Beach, and unloads us. The captain ties it up, turns off the motor, and then he retires for the heat of the day to the shade of the seaside café. There he eats, and drinks, and talks with Greek men—stray police, other boat captains and crew, the sweating, white-aproned cook, and occasional delivery men who roar up on mo-peds laden with cases of mineral water or eggplants for the café. Five or six hours later, the captain reboards his boat, blows its horn, starts up his motor, and the sun-soaked tourists drag back on to return to the main town, to its hotels, shops, and restaurants.

Ten years ago, when we were also on this island for several weeks, everything was very nearly the same. The same waiters, the same shops, the same striped shirts and wool bags fading against sunny walls, the same elaborate grey leather English prams, filled with lacy pillows, canned tomatoes, and enthroned, one beruffled, olive-eyed Greek baby. The same village simpleton employed with his broom in a dozen small establishments, wearing his Hell's Angel's T-shirt. But, this trip, aside from the bakery, which had been fixed up and painted a fresh green, there was one large change. Ten years ago, though they may have been scantily clad, no woman appeared on any of the public beaches without a top to her suit. Now, ten years later, except for the Greek women who remain most emphatically suited, nearly every woman on the beach, of whatever age, has bare breasts, and in some coves, bare everything. "Mom," said one of our boys the first day embarking from the beach taxi, thirty hours from the chill proprieties of Logan Airport and our own northern beaches where, for all but a few days of the year, you need a wool sweater, "Mom, that lady over there doesn't have on a whole suit."

We had not expected this, I don't know why we didn't, but so she doesn't, and, at once clear, neither does anyone else.

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This is not at all a normal moment. It is a startling moment. More so if one has no thought of doing it oneself. It is the sort of outlandish but limited experience about which you have immediately to ask: how do I feel? Much less, what do our eleven- and fifteen-year-olds feel? These breasts aren't just lying down either, they're up and moving, hundreds of more or less matched pairs.

The first thing you have to do is arrange your face and hope that the children will have the decency to do the same. They don't of course, they can't, and for two or three days of this, they do the worst: point and giggle and hit each other and stroll slowly, staring. Finally they seem to get used to it, or tire of it, at least they say so, and they return to playing with snorkles and whining for food.

The second thing you have to do, now that the obviously untraumatized boys have their faces recomposed and are back to lunch and swimming, is to work on your mind. You try to make this scene rhyme with its advance publicity: this is beautiful, and free, and healthy, and what's more, to go as naked as you please is *everyone's right,* and if you are such a pig that you find it either sexually exciting or morally offensive, then *that is your problem.*

Third, wishing ever, at first, to be rational, modern, and especially broad-minded, you try to compose in yourself the most difficult piece of the publicity: one is not supposed to think about this at all. Naturally, one is not supposed to look or stare or say something or in any way notice or react, certainly not sexually nor prudishly, but more difficult: one is not, if one is really modern, supposed to *think* about this. What's current bad behavior, what's truly shocking, is to think it is worth thinking about. It's natural, it's normal, two attributes which go without saying and which preclude thought. If you think about it, there's something wrong with you. Bare breasts on the beach, here and there bare genitals, should be as normal, as everyday, as are the empty faded packs of Marlboros, the abandoned bottles, the tattered oily paperbacks of *Airport* and *Princess Daisy,* and the squeezed-out tubes of Nivea Soleil. Breasts are simply something else on the beach and you, brother and sister of the flesh, had better bloody well think so, too.

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A spine of wooded, uninhabited hills, small mountains really, forms the imposing center of the island from end to end. On each side of this furry spine, the dry land falls abruptly to the sea. Every few miles, a bald stripe appears: the fire line, cut straight up through the trees, with the purpose of containing forest fires, too wide a bare space for sparks to jump. The Greek men sit under the fig trees, their backs to the beach. Their own women move in a weight of clothes, in the protection of their own cumbersome shade. The tourist men lie on the beach mats, clothed in their tiny suits, reading *Airport* or *Princess Daisy*, or adjusting the knobs on multi-wave radios. Sometimes they empty tubes of Nivea onto themselves or onto the breasts and bellies and backs of their women. Otherwise, they occupy themselves; they don't stare; they don't giggle; they are not playful, either, and their faces have an expression of somewhat lofty, gentle unconcern. They gaze out to sea as though they are thinking about business; perhaps they are. They seem careworn, forlorn, and not much warmed. And they behave like quiet eunuchs, especially so when they methodically and without feeling do the servicing of radio knobs, dig in their shorts for wads of money, and rub on the oil. A fire line has to cut through them. Otherwise, they'd become the missing piece of the beach: satyrs, noon gods, cavorting, slathering Pans.

Because they are not, because they are so diminished, they have the powerful effect of turning the woman from bare-breasted Artemis into slave. That's the fourth beach thought. The men must have to work so hard not to notice, to be liberal and free-minded and nonchauvinistic, that their effort transforms the nakedness of the women into costuming, as conscious and stagey as Hallowe'en crone or shepherdess. To go naked, after all, is to dress up as an infant, as a victim, or as a slave. This seems inescapable. There is no escaping history by untying a string, and for too long in the art and tribal lore of cold, northern, imperial places, nudity is established as peril. Escaping, the slave must first find garments to cover his shame, to hide and protect his true menial, owned state. These breasts on the beach, though brazen, are not proud. This unfortunate effect, created first by the studied, peaceful neutrality of all the men, is compounded by the difficulty of

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getting up and down the beach. These are not sandy beaches. It is a cruel walk, burning hot and sharp and stony. The women can't stride; shod, a proud free stride is difficult. Barefooted, barebreasted, it is impossible; they pick and mince, curse and stumble, their hands fly up stiffly to keep balance. They walk as though their breasts should be on trays. They move with such joyless, servile effort it seems as though they have been forced to go naked, as sign, as chattel, as someone else's visible symbol of power, acted out through drudgery, hard simple chores, and pitiless exposure. Their eunuchs, though sweet and free from lust, are powerless to alter the women's essential degradation of having to do as the master wills; and he, whoever he is, wills nakedness, even in these hard conditions.

You have to turn away from it. The general impudence and coldness of things is too sorrowful, and is perhaps the result of defiance. For how does one handle a position of defiance, of dare? By acting cold. And defiance is also inescapable. No one can go naked in a country whose native inhabitants are clothed without having to arrange an attitude. Blithe Spirit, thou cannot pull off. Nor relax, naked in public, because a front must be kept up against the clothed. And it must be, in Greece, of extreme mental difficulty to label and hence dismiss the old, funny, cackling, self-satisfied Greek women, puddling in the warm shallows, embalmed in their dark skirted bathing suits, big beach hats, baskets of food and wine and blankets, as uptight Puritans. They're having too good a time for that to stick. You would have to work too hard to escape their mirthful eye, and too hard to catch the eye of the waiter who will not look at you at all. And it is difficult to imagine what effort must go into the regendering of the patient escorts, temporary eunuchs on polite holiday.

Hence there is, at last, the last thought: light without warmth, provocation without sympathy, a cold, blue glare, like cans of burning Sterno. It sinks into you, this sadness, from the quarter mile of bodies lying exhausted with their feet towards the sea, like a blow to the bone, a hard slug in the pit, and leaves behind the utter coldness, the terrifying, unimportant, empty arrest that follows an unexpected slap. Cover the breasts, and the face is free. Uncover the breasts, and the face must perforce become a policeman.

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Two women are walking towards us, at noon, across the nearly deserted rocks. Most of the other swimmers and sunbathers are up in the café, eating lunch under the fig trees, the grapevine. These two women are not together, they walk several feet apart, and they do not look at each other. One is tall and blond, dressed in a flowered bikini and clogs, a tourist, English or American or Scandinavian or German. The other woman, a Greek, is carrying a basket, walking quickly, and gives the impression of being on a neighborhood errand. She is probably from one of the small old farms—sheep, olive trees, hens, gardens, goats—that border this stretch of sea and climb a little way into the pine and cypress woods.

Both are smoking and both walk upright. Beyond that, there is so little similarity they could belong to different planets, eras, species, sexes. The tourist looks young, the Greek looks old; actually, she looks as old as a village well and the blond looks like a drawn-out infant, but there could be as little as five or ten years difference between them.

The Greek woman is short and heavy, waistless, and is wearing a black dress, a black scarf pulled low around her eyes, a black sweater, thick black stockings, black shoes. She is stupendously there, black but for the walnut of her face, in the white sun, against the white space. She looks, at once, as if she could do everything she's ever done, anything needed, and also at once, she gives off an emanation of humor, powers, secrets, determinations, acts. She is moving straight ahead, like a moving church, a black peaked roof, a hot black hat, a dark tent, like a doom, a government, a force for good and evil, an ultimatum, a determined animal. She probably can't read, or write; she may never in her life have left this island; but she is beautiful, she could crush you, love you, mend you, deliver you of child or calf or lamb or illusion, bleed a pig, spear a fish, wring a supper's neck, till a field, coax an egg into life. Her sex is like a votive lamp flickering in a black, airless room. As she comes closer, she begins to crochet—that's what's in her basket, balls of cotton string and thick white lace coming off the hook and her brown fingers.

The blond tourist, struggling along the hot pebbles in her clogs, is coming back to her beach mat and friends. She looks as though she couldn't dress a doll without having a fit of sulks and throwing it down in a tantrum. It may not be the

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case, of course. She is on holiday, on this Greek island, which fact means both money and time. She is no doubt capable, well-meaning, and by the standards and expectations of most of the world's people, well-educated and very rich and very comfortable. She can undoubtedly read and write, most blond people can, and has, wherever she comes from, a vote, a voice, a degree of some kind, a job, a career perhaps, money certainly, opinions, friends, health, talents, habits, central heating, living relatives, personalized checks, a return ticket, a summer wardrobe, the usual bits and clamor we all, tourists, have. But presence, she has not. Nor authority, nor immediacy, nor joy for the eye, nor a look of adding to the world, not of strength nor humor nor excitement. Nearly naked, pretty, without discernible blemish, blond, tall, tan, firm, the product of red meat and whole milk, vitamins, orange juice, women's suffrage, freedom of religion, child labor laws, compulsory education, the anxious, dancing, lifelong attendance of uncounted numbers of furrow-browed adults, parents, teachers, pediatricians, orthodontists, counselors, hairdressers, diet and health and career and exercise and fashion consultants, still, she is not much to look at. She looks wonderful, but your eye, your heart, all in you that wants to look out on the substance of the people of the day, doesn't care, isn't interested long, is, in fact, diminished a little.

She could be anything—a professor of Romance Languages at a major university, a clerk in a Jermyn Street shop, a flight attendant, a Stockholm lawyer, but nothing shows of that life or luck or work or history, not world, not pain or freedom or sufficiency. What you think of, what her person walking towards you in the fierce noon light forces you to think of, after the momentary, automatic envy of her perfections, is that she looks as though she's never had enough—goods or rights or attention or half-decent days. Whether she is or not, she looks unutterably dissatisfied and peevish. And yet, in order to be here on this blue white beach on this July day, unless you are chasing your own stray goat across the rocks, requires a position of luxury, mobility, and privilege common to us but beyond any imagining of the Greek woman who walks here too with a basket of string and her hot, rusty clothes but who, however, and not at all paradoxically, exudes a deep, sustained bass note of slumbering, solid contentment.

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Insofar as ignorance always makes a space, romance rushes in to people it. With so little fact at hand about either of these lives, fact which might make things plain and profound as only fact can do, there is little but romance, theories, guess work, and yet, it seems, this accidental conjunction of women in the sun, considered, says it is not a matter of the one, the blond, being discontent in spite of much and the other, the farm woman in black, being smugly, perhaps ignorantly content with little. That theory is too much the stuff of individual virtue, and of fairy tales: grateful peasant, happy with scraps and rags, and querulous, bitchy princess, untried, suffering every pea, pursued by frogs, awaiting a magic deliverance. Because in literal, daily fact, the Greek woman has more than the tourist, and the tourist, wherever she comes from and despite her list of equipment and privileges, is also, in literal daily fact, deprived. To see this as a possible deciphering of this scene means to stop thinking of the good life strictly in terms of goods, services, and various rights, and think instead, insofar as we can, of other, almost muted because so nearly lost to us, needs of life.

Beyond seeing that she has two arms, two good legs, a tanned skin, blond hair and friends, I know nothing about this particular tourist. Beyond knowing that she has two arms, two good legs, a face that could stop or move an army, a black dress, and can crochet lace, I know nothing about this particular peasant woman. I don't even know, it's only a clumsy guess, that "peasant" should be the qualifying adjective. I can only talk about these women as they appeared, almost a mirage in the shimmer of beach heat, almost icons, for a moment and walked past; and as they are on an island where I, too, have spent a notch of time. Whatever the Greek woman, and her kind, has enjoyed or missed, has suffered or lost in war, under dictatorship, under occupation, from men, in poverty or plenty, I don't know. The other woman, I won't describe, won't further guess at, for she is familiar to us; she is us.

I don't know in what order of importance, should that order exist or be articulable, the Greek woman would place what occurs on the visible street of her life. For that is all I do see, all that we can see, and it wrings the heart, that visible street. For one thing, in most places, the street is not yet giv-

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en over to the demands of the motor. The Greek is still a citizen and a large part of his day is given to whatever life goes on in public, and that life takes place on the street. Much of what we do in private, in isolation, in small personally chosen groups—eating, drinking, talking, staring into space—is, in Greece, done on the impersonal, random street. This habit of daily gathering, which is done for no particular reason, that is, there is no special occasion, lends to every day and night the feel of mild, but lively festival.

Second, among the other visible things that "underdeveloped" means, it means that—due either to a generous wisdom that has survived, or else funding that is not yet available—there is not enough money for the fit to invent shelters for the unfit. For whatever reasons, the Greek woman still lives in a culture where this has not yet happened. That is, not only are the streets used by and for people, but all sorts of people are on them, still privileged to their piece of the sun, the common bread, the work, the gossip, the ongoing parade. Our children are pitying and amazed. After several days on these streets they assume that in Greece there are more fat and slow and old, more crippled and maimed, more feeble of mind and body, more blind and begging, more, in general, outcast folks than we, Americans, have. They are especially amazed at how *old* people get to be in Greece. Being young and American, and not living in New York, the only city we have that approximates the fullness and variety of a village, they assume this is evidence of extreme longevity on the one hand, and evidence of extreme bad health on the other. It was as hard to explain about American nursing homes and other asylums and institutions as it was to explain about public nudity, how archaeologists find hidden ruins, and other questions that came up on the trip.

A "developed" country is seldom mysterious but always mystifying. Where do things come from and where do they go? Life can be looked at, but not often comprehended in any of its ordinary particulars: food, shelter, work, money, producing and buying and selling. The Greek woman on the beach, again for many reasons, does still live in a world that, in those particulars—food, shelter, work, product, etc.—is comprehensible. Outside the few urban, industrial areas in

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Greece, it is still possible to build and conduct life without the benefit of technicians, specialists, explainers, bureaucrats, middlemen, and other modern experts. This means that there is possible an understanding of, a connection with, and a lack of technological mystification to many of the elements, objects, and products commonly lived with in any day. A typical Greek house is so simple and cunning that it could be built, or destroyed, by almost anyone. This may mean less convenience, but it also means more comprehension. For the ordinary person, there is relatively little of the multiform, continual, hardly-much-thought-about incomprehensibility of daily things—where does this lamb chop come from? where does this wash water go?—that most people in developed countries live with, or manage to ignore, every day. Therefore, for this Greek woman on the beach and her kind, there is another mind possible, one which sees, and understands, and in most instances can control many details; and a mind in which, therefore, many mysteries can grow a deeper root.

Food, to take another example, is eaten in season and most of it is locally grown, harvested or butchered, processed, sold and consumed. There is no particular moral virtue in this fact, but this fact does signify the possibility of a sharper, more acute (it sees, it has to see and comprehend more details) and more satisfied intelligence. Having money means being able to buy the end product; therefore, money replaces the need for intricate knowledge of processes; therefore, money replaces knowledge. The understanding of a glass of water or wine, a melon, an onion, or a fried fish, from inception to end, does mean living with a different kind of mind than the one which results from having merely bought and consumed the wine or fish or onion at the end. In that sense, therefore, it is possible that the unhappy peevishness and dissatisfaction on the face of the pretty tourist comes in part from a life of being left out of knowledge of the intricate details of the complete cycle of any single thing she is able to consume.

Including the country of Greece.

There is a new world everywhere now that money will buy. It is a world without a nation, though it exists as an overlay of life, something on the order of the computer, in almost any

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country of the globe. It is an international accommodation, and wherever it exists—whether in Madrid, London, Istanbul, Athens, Cleveland—it resembles a large airport lounge. In this way, the new world specially constructed everywhere for tourists is something like the thousands of Greek churches, as alike as eggs, and no matter what their size all modeled on the single great discovered design of Constantine's Hagia Sophia.

Inside this international accommodation is allowed only so much of any specific country as lends itself as background, decor, and trinkets. In this sense, the travel posters are an accurate portrayal of exactly how little can happen on a well-engineered trip: scenery and "gifts." Because most of the world is still what would be termed "poor," the more money you can spend, nearly any place, the more you are removed from the rich, complex life of that place. It is possible to buy everything that puts an average American life—taps that mix hot and cold, flush toilets, heating and cooling systems, menus in English—on top of any other existing world. It is possible to pay for every familiar security and comfort and, as the posters show, still have been *there* having it. At the end of the trip, you can say that you were there.

However, the extent to which one buys familiarity, in most of the world today, is also the extent to which one will not see, smell, taste, feel, or in any way be subjected to, enlightened by, or entered by that piece of the world and its people. The world's people are not blind to this fear of the unfamiliar and uncomfortable, nor insensitive to the dollars that will be paid to ward it off. In the winter months, when life returns to normal, the friendly Greek "waiters" resume their lives as masons, carpenters, builders, mechanics, schoolteachers, and so forth, a fact unknown to or overlooked by many tourists who assume, for example, that many unfinished buildings, seen languishing in the summer season, are due to neglect, laziness, disinterest, or what have you.

We all assume, and usually safely, that the more money you have the more you can buy. In travel, however, the opposite is true. The less money you spend, the less money you have to spend, perhaps, the more your chances of getting a whiff, now and then, of what another place is like. There are the

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ideals: walking a country, living there, learning its language. Short of that, those conditions which most of us cannot meet, one can try spending as little as possible: class D hotels, public transportation, street meals. And then one must try to be as brave and patient and good-humored and healthy as possible because, without a doubt, the less money you spend the closer you come to partaking of very annoying, confusing, exhausting, foreign, debilitating, sometimes outrageous discomfort.

For instance, the two things one would most want to avoid in Greece in the summer are the intense heat and the unworldly, unimaginable, unforeseeable amount of din. Pandemonium is, after all, a Greek idea, but in actual life, it is hardly confined to the hour of noon. Silence is a vacuum into which, like proverbial nature, a single Greek will rush with a pure love of noise. Two Greeks together produce more noise than 200 of any other Western nation. Greeks love above all else the human voice, raised in any emotion; next to that they love their actions with objects. One Greek with any object—a string of beads, a two-cylinder engine, preferably one on the eternal blink, a rug to beat, a single child to mind, a chair to be moved—will fill all time and space with his operation; it will be the Platonic scrape of metal chair leg on stone street; it will be the one explanation to last for all eternity why the child should not torture the cat in the garden. A generalization: Greeks love horns, bells, animal cries, arguments, dented fenders, lengthy explanations, soccer games, small motors, pots and pans, cases of empty bottles, vehicles without mufflers, cups against saucers, fireworks, political songs, metal awnings, loud-speakers, musical instruments, grandmothers, the Orthodox liturgy, traffic jams, the sound of breaking glass, and Mercedes taxi cabs that tootle "Mary Had A Little Lamb."

A further generalization: the above generalization is one that only *not* spending money will buy. That is, you have to be in a class F room, in a hotel on the harbor, one flight above a taverna frequented by fishermen, 120 degrees in the room, no screens, mosquito coils burning in the unmoving air through the night, and through the night—a donkey in heat tethered in the walled garden below your shuttered, only shuttered, window. In other words, it's quiet, and cool, at the

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Hilton; and there are, God and international capitalism be thanked, no donkeys.

And the Greeks love what the human hand can do. The Greek woman on the beach, crocheting the heavy lace, lives in an atmosphere created in part by the exceptional amount of touching that goes on, both of other people, children especially, and of all objects. It is a visible world burnished, rounded by the human hand, and foot, and the intimate, mysterious, warmed contours that come only from the brush of years of hands, petting and shaping, hands speaking. Surfaces are so much handled it's as though they now move out from themselves towards the caress of the hand. There are few hard edges, mathematical edges, even in the cities where, from the top of the Acropolis, for instance, Athens at its gentle foot is a smooth, rounded, white-washed spread of infinite village. Things, hundreds of things furthermore, are the size that human hands can do. Living elsewhere, waiting, knowing all one's life that the great monuments of grandeur yet exist for us only in Greece, and then going to Greece, what surprise to find all habitations, whether of old god or new man, so small, so sensible, so pious, so mysteriously scaled. When the hot tourist grumbles, "These stones all look alike to me," he's absolutely right. And therein is some meaning to reach for.

The Greeks gave us our patterns. They invented the patterns for us. Surely such patterns—of logic, of love, of invocation—exist elsewhere in the world, but these are still ours, these, our organizations of emphatic, comprehensible meaning. These the patterns that have penetrated our bones; we resonate with them, even in ruins, like struck gongs. Despite having had one of the worst histories of the last ten, or hundred, or any number of years, something in Greece has survived, lives on still, is still all right, still blessed; something has not gone down or been lost. It lives on in these remarkable faces. The invisible worm does not yet live here. Sometimes what has survived feels like a sense of humor that comes of a self-love so forthright, rich, grave, curious, so gentle, that it survives all terror, upheaval, and excess. Sometimes it feels like a chosen poverty of goods and a ceremonial elaboration

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of daily events that consciously refuse the intervention of metal, calculation, efficiency, ideologies, speed, abstraction. It feels like Henry Miller's assertion that God has not yet turned his back on Greece; and it feels like the sum of the gifts that Aristotle says endow the happy man. It feels as though Greece has yet managed to escape the tyranny of the merely fit. It feels as though life on the visible street still corresponds to the totality of the old human lot: the tragic, the comic, the lame, the fat, the halt, the silly, the invented, the play-acted, the smallest needs, the infinite variations of the exceptional and human.

Drama, one of the patterns that has come down to us, began as propitiation of the gods, and asked, "Was this it? Is this right?" Whatever it is that yet survives the worm here, it keeps that question alive, that question, and love enough for everything to have its say, its sun, love for the intelligence of touch, for the immediacy of ancient gossip, and for the incarnate knowledge that life is short and, we are all of it.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

# Five Poems for F. D.

## Aux Balcons

The rue Ménilmontant runs up a hill
to meet the fading neighborhoods of Belleville
all destined to perish soon
beneath the city planners' printed blue.
For weeks I lived up there without you,
rooming in a hotel called *Aux Balcons*
whose balconies were nothing more
than curly grillwork fitted in the windows.
Mornings turned my window to grisaille
whenever the Paris sun laced through
the clouds and iron flowers.

I hung up blood-red oranges from Spain,
Indian scarves you sent me long ago,
maps of the Aegean and rough brown apples
against the speckled walls.
The room looked out behind all my disguises,
admitting its shabby furniture again
in the full-length looking-glass
which now and then, on my scattered reflection,
posed the curves of your half-naked body
between its silver surface
and the mercuric window of the sky.

Poetry, mathematics, streets and dreams:
books became another kind of romance,
leaning towards me on the slanted shelves.
I worked against the future,
kept two candles burning on the table

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so I could go on reading late at night,
and when they drowned at last in their own eyes
I read the shapes of darkness.
Solitude came down at intervals
like moonlight on the wall,
creating its own sweet time, another life.

I ate my dinner at the window, watching
traffic coiling through the streets of Belleville,
raucous and exotic as the aisles
of some north African bazaar.
And over that harsh variant of silence
I listened for your footstep, sometimes
opened to an empty entryway.
Sometimes I set a candle in the window
intending to bring you home
so I could fall asleep, as if you were
the true illumination of my dreams.

## Dinner in the Courtyard

When summer tears the maple leaves
to lace, and blue shows through the green
like those imagined distances
weaving through all things close at hand,
then sunset looms for hours upon
the scarlet tenements of day,
unraveling curtains, windowpanes
ablaze. The house is close, I say,

and move the table underneath
the arches of the maple tree.
Not even the curious neighbors know
if I am host or stranger here,
nor if this roof of leaf and air,
the little courtyard of the world, is home.

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# 97 rue Compans

A spot of color! said the white-haired
gardener, her scarlet fingernails
mauve with black dirt, her lipstick's red awry,
tamping limp geraniums in a pot
whose handles were the ingrown horns of satyrs.
I admired her industry,
but never was really sure about her motives.
Why did she dress so brilliantly to garden?
The courtyard throbbed a little in surprise
at its heart of darker green,
the barren lilac, maples and ropes of ivy
where spiders hung their wings in cotton foils.

The landlord's son, who oversaw the courtyard
to work without abandoning idleness,
appeared sometimes with a bottle of *Ricard*
and warmly encouraged Madame Labiche's progress
among the potted flowers.
In fact, he must have fallen in love with her
despite the uneasy difference in their ages.
Though he never declared his affection,
he chopped off every lilac one day in April
and presented the lavish bouquet
to her confusion and everyone else's disgust.

Some people quickly forgave him,
discounting his reckless act as a crime of passion.
But whenever I saw him taunt his timid wife
or send his children out to buy him liquor,
I found it hard to suppose
his romantic, because impossible, heart's desire
excused his various flurries of unkindness.
Besides, he often forgot or misplaced our letters
(Madame Labiche's he opened), poisoned cats
instead of the swarming mice,
and persecuted the roots of the maple tree
which rose beneath our feet like a buried star.

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# In the Garden

Where are the children?
—Sido

Up in the hazelbush that stood for a tree
at the southmost wall of the garden,
the children lived like swallows
while their father and I cut grass
underneath, and weeded and watered the yellow roses.

They climbed by swinging up on pliant limbs
and imagined a different home,
disposing all they owned by pieces of string
on the branches around them:
dolls, bells, bags of raisins, waterbottles.

Parts of the house became a constellation.
The children quarreled, sang and fell
on the hill of half-moon grass
we gathered underneath them, plash, unbroken
as falling stars against the roof at midnight.

They rose and fell, delighted,
walked up the stairs of grass into their tower.
Although they never learned to fly,
they overarched the swallows easily
with their continuous invented music.

But where, where are the children?
I've been to the house and garden
lately, alone; the bush has tassels,
the garden is overgrown, the swallows
repeat their single note among the branches.

Perhaps the gypsies stole them.
Perhaps they've found another home.
Perhaps they'll come to light again next spring
when swallows travel back from Egypt
nesting in the ships which still have sails.

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# The Last of the Courtyard

Who will believe me later, when I say
we lived in a state of music? Passing birds
and mice met on the roof, and danced away.

Francis played his silver flute, and Guy
his violin; the children sang in words.
Who will believe me later, when I say

we lived on little else from day to day?
Life in the courtyard was its own reward.
Mice danced across the roof, and ran away.

Carpenter, painter, potter: poverty
is the sole good a singing man affords,
though not at last sufficient. As they say,

we lose the things for which we cannot pay;
our houses were sold out, over our heads.
Even the dancing mice must go away,

nothing remains of us but memory,
a fleeting minor air, absently heard.
Who will believe me later, when I say
the mice danced on the roof, and ran away?

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## POSTSCRIPT:

*The courtyard at 97 rue Compans, valuable property near the center of Paris, was sold to developers and all the inhabitants were evicted. This message was left behind, written on a wall of one of the small houses:*

### PETITION FOR THE TREES

To the new owner:

In this place, whose walls breathe quietly, whose windows filter the tranquil light, where the trees grow suspended in the patience of time; here our children lived and played, families of painters, sculptors and artisans . . .

Even though your interests now lie in destroying and emptying the life of this place, Monsieur, don't attack the trees. Look up at them for a while, let them overshadow you. Then, from the threshold of hope I say, that they will still be standing when you and I are gone.

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JOHN FINLAY

# Flaubert in Egypt[1]

## I

The Egypt of Flaubert which is the subject of this essay is not the geographical one which Flaubert visited with his friend Maxime DuCamp in 1849 and 1850, and about which he wrote in some of the most memorable letters ever written. It is rather the Egypt which Flaubert made in his own mind and then found reflected in the one he visited. All artists have landscapes of their own, governed by a particular kind of weather and influenced by seasons all their own. Flaubert knew himself a northerner, infected with all the sadness and nervousness which prolonged darkness and ice can breed in the human soul. He felt himself drawn to the south just as he said his barbaric ancestors had been drawn to the occupation and pillage of the whole Mediterranean world centuries before. He wanted and found there warmth and color, and clarity of vision, the insistence on which seems innate in French artists. But at the heart of the matter he also wanted a particular atmosphere purged of miasmas so that he could breathe in its cleanness and be rid of a sickness which existed, I think, at the deepest level of his being.

Flaubert's Egypt in essence is the land of the dead where intense sunlight quickly burns up putrefied flesh and leaves only the skeleton behind. Its poetic image is the monumental charnel house of *The Temptation of St. Antony* where the dead, soaked in perfumes and rendered indestructible, sleep out thousands of years while above them the desert stretches end-

[1] The quotations from Flaubert which I cite in this essay come from the following translations: Kitty Mrosovsky, *The Temptation of St. Antony* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); A. J. Krailsheimer, *Salammbo* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977); Francis Steegmuller, *Madame Bovary* (New York: Random House, 1957) and *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

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lessly away and the statues of "unmoving gods," with their massive shoulders stained white by the excrement of birds, stare off blindly into space. It resembles the Egypt of the gnostic mythologies which used the country as a symbol for the prison-house of the whole cosmos and for the corruption and death dealt out by the archons governing it. And Flaubert reveals himself infected here with the same *Egyptianism* of which Nietzsche found all past philosophers guilty. They violated actual existence, Nietzsche argues in *The Twilight of the Idols,* to the extent that they placed any value at all in things changeless and eternal, the nothingness of death being a greater violation than the Platonic Forms or the Christian afterlife.

Of course, the *Letters* swarm with those carefully observed details that attest to Flaubert's famous attention to the immediate world around him, which the novels also are filled with. A sense of frenetic activity, a youthful exuberance, apparent in the sexual freedom Flaubert enjoyed in Egypt, characterize the *Letters* and make them different from the sober and more labored visions of *Salammbô* and *The Temptation of St. Antony.* But even in the *Letters* what gives the details their color and vividness is the Egyptian blackness just under their surfaces, and Flaubert, we suspect, is interested in them because they occasion this starkly defining contrast.

What rivets him at all times is the Egypt of vacancy populated on its surface with things beautiful because they are either exhausted or rotten inside. The old Coptic bishop in Cairo is soon worn out by the theological conversation which Flaubert has with him as he sits mumbling half-intelligibly in his white beard. Vultures and eagles circle above the Nile as naked monks race down the cliffs lining the shore and swim out to the passing boats to beg for alms. It is not the pearls themselves Flaubert is interested in, but the blood coming out of both ears and eyes of the pearl-fishers as they emerge out of tons of pressure on their skulls. The numerous prostitutes with whom Flaubert has dealings all seem both bruised and metallic; their stomachs are cold to the touch and one senses disease and sores under the painted coins and jewels with which they decorate their bodies. "Splendid things gleam in the filth," he says in the *Letters.* And there is the night he

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spent with the famous courtesan Kuchuk Hanem: "I sucked her furiously, her body was covered with sweat, she was tired after dancing, she was cold." The nauseating odor of bedbugs mingled with the scent of her skin, which was dripping with sandalwood oil—the "bitter undertaste" which Flaubert said he wanted in everything. Later, he gets up to urinate in the street outside her house, and looks up into the luminous depths of the Egyptian night-sky and sees it "clear and immensely distant."

The same sky appears in *Salammbô,* presided over by the Carthaginian goddess Tanit, and the world under her lunar intensity is the same as the Egypt of the *Letters.* With its peculiar combination of the precise and the grotesque, only Flaubert could have written the catalogue of the goddess's activities which appears in the third chapter: "As you wax and wane, so cats' eyes and panthers' spots expand and shrink. Mothers cry your name in the pangs of childhood. You swell the seashells. You make wines ferment. You make corpses rot. You form pearls at the bottom of the sea." But she is terrifying for the human being not completely devoted to her worship. Her influence extends beyond fertility and growth to embrace insanity and death, all of which indifferently mean the same to her. Her eyes eat up the stones of buildings and animals go mad under her dark side. Nothing touches her in her remoteness and purity. Her detachment is beyond good and evil, and the peace she dispenses is obtained only after the nerves have been deadened and the mind washed out.

The desert and the void are never far away for Flaubert in Egypt. "I shall show you," the personified Death tells St. Antony in the *Temptation,* "what you tried to glean, by the light of tapers, from the faces of the dead—or when you vagabonded beyond the Pyramids, in those great sands composed of human remains. From time to time a fragment of skull turned beneath your sandal. You grasped some dust, you let it sift through your fingers; and your mind, mixing with it, vanished into the void."

Flaubert himself had had opportunities to discover what one can from the faces of the dead. His father and his sister

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died within a few months of each other in the early part of 1846. In April of 1848 he suffered the greatest loss of his life, the death by tuberculosis of his friend Alfred LePoittevin, to whom he dedicated *The Temptation of St. Antony*. Flaubert's account in the *Letters* of the night-long vigils he kept beside the coffins of his sister and LePoittevin contain the secret of his response to Egypt.

> I was reading Montaigne; my eyes kept turning from my book to the corpse; her husband and the priest were snoring; and I kept telling myself, as I saw all this, that forms disappear, that the idea alone remains; and I kept feeling thrills at turns of phrase in the Montaigne, and reflected that he too would be forgotten. It was freezing, the window was open because of the odor, and from time to time I got up to look at the stars, calm, radiant, eternal.
>
> At daybreak, about four o'clock, the attendant and I began our task. I lifted him, turned him, covered him. The feeling of the coldness and rigidity of his limbs stayed in my fingertips all the next day. He was horribly decomposed; the sheets were stained through. We wrapped him in two shrouds. When it was done he looked like an Egyptian mummy in its bandages, and I was filled with an indescribable sense of joy and relief on his account. There was a whitish mist, the trees were beginning to be visible through it. The two tapers shone in the dawning whiteness; two or three birds sang, and I recited to myself this sequence from his *Bélial*: *Il ira, joyeux oiseau, saluer dans les pins le soleil levant.*

Some quintessential quality of Flaubert, and of Europe after the Enlightenment and the Revolution, is clearly and completely expressed in these passages. They are as static and emblematic in this respect as illuminations in a medieval manuscript. A fatalistic sadness permeates the clarity and succinctness of their style, and through them we realize the full extent of what the loss of Christendom cost the European mind. No real consolation exists for Flaubert as he suffers through these nights. His philosophical skepticism and secularism, his overt commitment to the scientific attitude of his father do not allow him the passion and purgation of grief. There is only the night-sky outside, the infinite stretches of space, and the calmness and radiance of eternal stars. The

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annihilation of the human being deprives life of permanent substance and finally renders it as meaningless as the black tunnel and the locked door of Emma Bovary. And in the loss of substance and the absence of religion, what is left the mind to save itself from a terrifying boredom but the strategy of detachment and an obsession with style?

*We wrapped him in two shrouds.* Grief goes underground in this modern *Pietà,* or else finds muffled expression in the sense of relief and joy Flaubert says he felt when the death-stench was taken care of and his friend lay shrouded in the white dawn like an Egyptian mummy. One thinks of Emma Bovary's agonizing last hours and the black liquid which pours out of her mouth after she has died and which stains the wedding dress. The childhood experience of observing the cadavers laid out on slabs in the dissecting room of his father's hospital, with the sunlight pouring in on them, must have seared itself into Flaubert's mind as the vision of what human life actually is. He took care of the disgust and horror death surely inspired in him only by staring straight into its face and accustoming himself by degrees to its hideousness, after which he then could afford to be cool and realistic. Since it is only because of existence that death has any terror at all, he could free himself of that terror only by disengaging himself, as far as he could, from existence itself. According to the strange logic of the situation, existence then is shunned as a contaminated falseness and death is seen as release. The very thing that provokes the horror becomes the thing desired.

Flaubert responded to Egypt because he thought he saw there an indifference to pain and disease, and a familiarization with the grotesque and the repulsive so complete that they no longer disturbed or offended. The depths and luminous precision of the eastern nights, the hodge-podge of cults one found in Egypt, the persistence of primitive forms of worship, the whole scattered and promiscuous evidence of corruption and mortality that met one everywhere, all this suggested to Flaubert's mind an acceptance of death at those ancient levels that mysteriously combine the mystical and animalistic. "But after pillaging temples," the narrator says of the mercenaries in *Salammbô,* "seeing numerous nations and massacres, many finished by believing only in fate and death; and

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every evening they fell asleep with the same placidity as wild beasts." Here was none of the smudge of Christianity, for which death is the consequence of sin, nor any of the vagueness of those substitute religions which nineteenth-century Europe hoped somehow would take the place of Christianity, the dogma of progress and perfectibility of man, the spiritualization of nature, political and economic utopianism, even bourgeois respectability, for all of which the fact of death presented insoluble problems and caused profound embarrassment. Egypt also eliminated the sexual neurosis of the nineteenth century. The moral abandonment, to which the "vermilion depths of Africa" invited Flaubert, and after him Rimbaud and countless others, released sex from all restrictions so that it too could regress to its primitive association with death and become part of the whole Egyptian matrix.

In a certain sense, the whole nineteenth century was drawn into the depths of Africa. The numerous voyages into unexplored wildernesses undertaken then, the invasions and pillage of Africa and Asia, the artistic cult of the irrational and the instinctual, the descent through layer upon layer of biological and geological strata in search of what Nietzsche called *Homo naturus,* the naked X, all this indicates the extent to which primitivism gripped the Western mind. God was either dead or remote in their minds. Philosophical absolutes, even the idea of objective truth itself, were medieval cobwebs to them. Nothing prevented these intrepid explorers from an increasingly deeper investigation of the only reality they recognized, naked and pure naturalism. Progress gave them the idea of a primitive origin, the first crude basis for all further progressions and improvements. If they could discover that, they then would have in hand the basic stuff of their own identities. In other words, they were searching for themselves and a death's head. Many of them found a great deal of the former; all of them discovered the latter.

Flaubert, of course, went home, disentangled himself from his mistress, lived with his mother, and, as everyone knows, devoted himself ascetically to his art. He felt nothing but bored disgust with nearly all the prevailing passions and preoccupations of the century he lived and died in. He thought its optimism naive and its ambitions unrealizable, and he prided himself on the fact that he had no illusions. In the

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*Temptation,* after St. Antony has listened to the incantatory dialogue of Lust and Death, in which Death says his irony exceeds all other, the fragmented saint is shown the biological origin of life and sees nothing but vague deformity and monstrous pullulations. He then cries out in fearless and suicidal frenzy that he wants to be reduced back to matter, his last statement in the book. Flaubert knew that the problem facing modern man after the death of God was not only the horror of death, but the desire for it. No wonder Sigmund Freud admired *The Temptation of St. Antony,* saying that it "confirms the awareness of our perplexity in the mysteriousness that reigns everywhere." *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is nothing but a systematic abstraction of St. Antony's last cry. Flaubert's Egyptianism is now drained of its color and presented with a chilling scientific rigor. The death-instinct is placed inside the mind itself as its most primitive and fundamental element. This conservative instinct abides for its time the tensions and complications of eros and then, following its own inaccessible laws, it asserts its own domination and sucks the human being back into quietness and purity of matter.

II

Existence itself becomes intolerable for Emma Bovary and she ends by committing suicide. The French Revolution destroyed the medieval concept of the state in the person of a king as the reflector of divine order. It created instead the totally secular state expressing itself through bureaucracy and committed to the satisfaction of mundane processes. The masses came out of their dark places, felt their whole existence a deprivation, and demanded that they be filled. Emma Bovary is a psychological child of these masses, with something still left in her of the callousness of her rustic forefathers. Unlike them, she has nothing to do. We feel at times we barely know her and become impatient with the externality of Flaubert's vision. Then we realize there is not *one* person in her to know. Given neither solidity nor graininess by a specific station or task, she can only dream of successive identities and become none of them. She is always waiting for something to transform her or provide her with an object adequate to her immeasurable passion. She too wants to be filled,

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or consumed, but in the winter light she sees at Tostes, the light that looks as if it were filtered through ground glass, she is convulsed with nausea.

"We are beginning the history of man," Comte de Mirabeau once asserted during the early days of the Revolution. Perhaps Flaubert had Mirabeau's confident statement in mind when he gave the name *Homais* to his bourgeois pharmacist. In any event, Homais's type dominates that history and his egotistic materialism creates the world in which Emma Bovary finally becomes tragic. His coadjutor is the shop-keeper and money-lender Lheureux, Plato's *economic man,* who lives parasitically on Emma's compulsive desire for inessential goods. He instigates the crisis which she resolves by suicide and Homais unwittingly furnishes her the poison.

Their foil is the priest Bournisien, a man committed to his vocation, but one whose simple piety renders him pathetically unequal to the desperateness of Emma's condition. The plaster priest in the Bovary back garden at Tostes, with white scurf breaking out on his face, more accurately reflects the invalidity of the Catholic Church which Flaubert assumes as a historical fact in *Madame Bovary.* Only on Emma's deathbed does the Church for a moment claim his serious attention; yet the intrusion of the blind beggar, appearing suddenly at the window, shatters the tentative peace induced by extreme unction and the woman dies in uncontrolled terror.

Existence becomes intolerable because she asks that passion be consummated in a world where nothing coheres, where everything deceives and dissolves. Her two lovers, Léon and Rodolphe, play their roles for a time to gratify their lust, then desert her for bourgeois duties in "the molds and mildews of the nineteenth century." Both men, understandably perhaps, refuse to destroy themselves for Emma's spiritual impossibilities. But her passion gives her no quarter. A romanticism of illusion and escape informs its surface, but underneath it resembles some primitive force much like the moon she sees rising straight out of the earth and forming headless serpents on the river's surface. Its undischarged energy makes her mad and depraved, but her stubborn devotion to it drives her to the extreme vision, where suffering illuminates error. The reality of human existence is not the image of the earthy Rodolphe or the poetic Léon; neither is it discoverable in the

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fiction or journalism she devours in her vacant hours at Yonville. It is rather the blind beggar with bloody sockets for eyelids and flesh dissolving from his hideous face. Emma turns away from him in disgusted horror throughout the novel, but at the end she is forced to see him as life stripped bare, as the truth behind deceptive appearance which passion mistook for reality. As with all thinkers and artists who live out the death of God, the great error in Flaubert's universe is not disobedience but delusion.

And yet if he dramatizes the tragic consequences of passion, he nowhere celebrates the world which destroyed that passion. "Spongy foetuses in the pharmacy window continue to disintegrate in their cloudy alcohol," he says of time since Homais won his Legion of Honor. Mirabeau's "history of man" disgusts him more than Emma's passion attracts *and* terrifies him. This first modern novel offers only the vision of the four walls closing in and the soul anguished by the sense that it belongs somewhere else. After Léon leaves Emma for his studies in Paris, the bad days of Tostes start all over again, the days when the future loomed before her as "a pitch-black tunnel, ending in a locked door." She watches the night close in upon Yonville and feels herself "left alone in a horrible void of piercing cold." Flaubert's detachment in rendering this hopeless vision of the modern world would be unbearable were it not for the strange sadness one finds everywhere in this novel, and with reason since he said Emma Bovary was himself.

"You lack sufficient hatred of life," he wrote his mistress Louise Colet, wishing she would realize once and for all that existing and suffering are horribly bound together. Disillusionment is not enough, but must be animated by hate, if one wants to escape the agonies of Emma Bovary. Since it is eros that binds us to life and causes its instinctive repetition, he defeated that force in himself, devised an aesthetic which made him immune to passion, and so eluded the fate of the heroine he resembled. He wished not only to achieve stoical sufficiency in this strange warfare, but, more compellingly, to sterilize the Manichaean germ which he believed polluted existence at its core. The horror of causing another human life riveted him to celibacy. In his youth he thought once of castrating himself. He released art from all dependency, puri-

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fied it of emotional contamination, and gave it an aseity which most people would think attributable only to a God. Art need be nothing, he kept saying, but its own dispassionate and isolated self; in fact, it should be concerned with nothing just as God Himself is *about* nothing only because He *is* everything. The obligations inherent in communal language, the moral responsibilities of the artist, even the very idea of an audience, are all surgically removed from the artistic process so that nothing need blemish the compulsive self-reflection of the Flaubertian aesthetic. No theory of art appears so monolithically impersonal and no theory is so rooted in a psychological obsession with cleansing oneself of the defilement of human existence.

How did it come about that Flaubert sickened of existence and responded so avidly to Egypt? Part of the answer must lie in his earliest years; evidence indicates some internal scar which he received then and which affected him for the rest of his life. Its exact nature eludes us completely, as most likely it did Flaubert himself, for we are here talking about an impenetrable obscurity, something, in fact, demonic in its unverifiableness and immediacy. The epileptic seizures to which he was subjected also form part of this dark picture. A psychological sense of *being maimed* must have permanently lodged itself in Flaubert's mind after the disease's other debris had dissolved away. There is another cause. The one strange fact about himself which he returns to over and again in the *Letters* is that at bottom he is religious. Of course, he uses religion to explain his art, but something is left over unappropriated by pure aestheticism, which reveals an unsatisfied longing to believe and be done with it. *A Simple Heart* is animated by this longing from beginning to end. He felt most at home, not in his own time, but in those first centuries of the Christian era, whose religions and mysticisms he studied and knew so well. How strongly he reminds us at times of a combination of St. Jerome and Marcus Aurelius! But even though he said he hated it, he knew he belonged to the nineteenth century, to "the molds and mildews" of its bleak scientific systems, which claimed him and coerced his intellectual assent. The religious longing so frustrated could only turn into a strange form of mysticism allied in its denigration of human life to the very science which drove religion underground. As

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Nietzsche alone rightly saw, nineteenth-century science, so insisted upon as enlightenment itself, did not liberate modern Europe from its gnostic nightmare, from its "ascetical sickness." It only continued it under new guises by ruthlessly stripping man bare of moral and metaphysical dignity and by flinging him into a meaningless universe in which his life is as vain indeed as any of Nietzsche's maddest monks could have hoped for.

## III

And yet there is a God concealed in Flaubert's life and work, one who alone escapes unharmed all the acid tests of skepticism and who invites, conveniently enough for Flaubert, an imaginative, instead of a dogmatic, assent. This God is the Unknown Father, the *Deus absconditus* of gnostic mysticism, whose presence is only revealed in negations and annihilations. He has always reappeared whenever the Western world sickens of itself and begins to crave mystical and totalitarian solutions to its problems. "But as I have revolved," the Gymnosophist says in a passage from the *Temptation* which the *Letters* continually re-echo, "through an infinite quantity of existence in the guise of gods, men and animals, I renounce the journey, I want no more of this exhaustion! I am abandoning the dirty inn of my body walled with flesh, red with blood, covered with hideous skin, full of filth—and as my reward I shall sleep in the depth of the absolute, in Annihilation."

With the succinctness of the most compressed philosophical formula, this same mask of a character states the central paradox of such mysticism: *By the very fact that I know a thing, that thing ceases to exist.* According to gnostic theodicy, inferior gods created this world. The material they used was nothing in its essence but unreal dregs vomited out of other gods who had tried through passion to know the unknowable Father. This world, consequently, embodies no reality but is only mattered ignorance instead. When one knows *this thing,* one then brings it back to its original state of nothingness and thus annihilates it. In the same way one must kill any God the idea of whom might exist in the human mind. Nothing can express the unknowable God, who does not exist according to any category of being the mind can apprehend. This God re-

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quires then, most strangely, a form of atheism, and one approaches him by nullifying the created world and by committing intellectual suicide.

After Rodolphe betrays and deserts Emma, she returns to religious devotions and briefly experiences the ecstatic union with such a divinity, whom some readers might innocently think Christian: "Emma felt something powerful pass over her that rid her of all pain, all perception, all feeling. Her flesh had been relieved of its burdens, even the burden of thought; another life was beginning; it seemed to her that her spirit, ascending to God, was about to find annihilation in this love, like burning incense dissolving in smoke." Still gripped by this vision, she later "turned her eyes inward and watched the destruction of her will." St. Antony goes further: "On the contrary! Man, being spirit, must withdraw from mortal things. All action degrades him. I could wish not to be attached to the earth—not even by the soles of my feet." Hilarion, the former disciple of St. Antony, knows his master's heretical yearning, not for the God of Genesis Who says flesh is good, nor for the God of the New Testament Who assumed flesh, but rather for the Unknown God to whom flesh is an obscuring defilement. He lives in a far country, but Hilarion offers to show the inhumanly allegorical way: "The secret you would like to hold is guarded by sages. They live in a far country, seated under gigantic trees, dressed in white and calm as gods. The air that nourishes them is hot. Leopards stalk about them on the grass. Murmuring springs and the whinnying of unicorns mix with their voices. You shall listen to them: and the face of the Unknown will be unveiled!" At the very end of the book, after a succession of *Gotterdammerungs* has fragmented and dispersed the saint's mind, an enigmatic image of Christ inside the very disc of the sun suddenly appears and shines out over the expanse of nothingness. Through its silence and inscrutability the image confesses to the gnostic transformation of Christ into an emissary from the Unknown God, to whom St. Antony then returns in his prayers.

The Jehovah of the Hebrews works in history which He would redeem for His chosen people; the Incarnation of the Christian God *is* history and promises through grace the redemption and restoration of a fallen nature which in its radi-

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calness is untainted by evil—through that act, as St. Augustine says with classical brevity, God tells the creature He created, "I want you to be." But the ahistorical and acosmic *Deus absconditus* causes such conflict between the divine and the natural that only one of the two survives the vicious warfare they carry on in the human soul. "There comes a moment when one needs to make oneself suffer," Flaubert emphasizes in a horrifying moment of self-hate, "needs to loathe one's flesh, to fling mud in its face, so hideous does it seem." Such warfare has destroyed whatever humanity St. Antony might once have had; at Flaubert's hands he is now nothing but a hollowness cut off from the world, an un-man who no longer can endure himself. St. Julian kills his parents; Mâtho's desire for the mystical Salammbô consumes his life, just as Salammbô herself cries out that the god Moloch burns her through. Emma greedily eats her poison. Spiritual blindness made her accept the world as something other than a rotting shell with nothing but its own thin beauty of putrescence. She could not *know* it in her mind, and she suffered accordingly.

"I'm a mystic at bottom," Flaubert once said, "and I believe in nothing." How profoundly revealing is Flaubert's *and*! Nothingness and mysticism embrace each other in his mind. "Art, like the God of the Jews," he also said, "feasts on holocausts." Here Flaubert justifies those thinkers who consider him the father of modernity. Sigmund Freud some years later recognized that the revolutionary discoveries he made about the human mind, the buried secrets and impulses he unearthed and brought to scientific light, merely continued a destructive process which had been going on for some time. In his own words, the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions destroyed the illusions of earth's centrality and man's possession of a transcendent mind; accepting the Darwinian animality of man, Freud only further showed that this animal is not even the master in his own house, but a slave, instead, driven by unspeakable forces. None of Freud's theories would have surprised Flaubert had he lived to study them. He saw no escape from the abasement of man which modern scientific thought seemed inevitably to entail, and he accepted with intellectual equanimity the meaninglessness to which that science reduced all human values. At the same time, and with equal conviction, he revered the religious spirit as expressing the

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deepest, most instinctual part of man. But institutionalized religion was gutted for him, and philosophical or theological systems were dismissed by him as historical curiosities. What else could such a person say but that at bottom he was a mystic and that he believed in nothing? Scientific reductionism and mystical renunciation reinforced each other in his mind—both undermine the ground of man's earth, the shelter of his existence, and both strip man to that degree of nakedness and insignificance which their differing ends demand. Both involve, as we in this atomic and apocalyptic age should know, the prospect of horrifying waste and destruction. And what other God can so conveniently move into this skeptical void and instigate man's mindless, even unconscious, worship as the Hidden God of gnostic mysticism, whose "divine nothingness" is proof against thought itself?

Even Flaubert's apparently nihilistic moments, when all Gods were done with, still resonated with the consequences, if not the cause, of mystical intensity. "I believe in nothing," he once more simply said. "I doubt everything, and why shouldn't I? I am quite resigned to working all my life like a nigger with no hope of reward. It is a sore that I keep scratching, that's all." But Flaubert betrays himself here—he cannot believe in nothing when he believes so passionately that life is some disease and work a futility. Only from the point of view of some still-persisting standard of mystical perfection, absent though it seemed, could he have arrived at such a judgment and stated it with such bitter dogmatic assurance. True nihilists keep silent, or put bullets in their brains; they don't labor for years over a *Madame Bovary* or point to a *Temptation of St. Antony* as *l'oeuvre de toute ma vie.*

When Flaubert does have these moments of apparent nihilism, he becomes completely modern. "If society continues on its present path," he wrote Louise Colet in 1852, "I think we shall once again see mystics, such as existed in all dark ages. Unable to expand, the soul will concentrate on itself." Theological frameworks fall away; subjective internalizations engorge the objective world; one never speaks or thinks of final causes; irrational fervors abuse the intellect; one goes deeper and deeper into the processes of self but discovers nothing that holds. In this dark night the modern mind does not see its Foreign God for the very nothingness that only that God caused to be.

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KEITH WILSON

# The Day of the Sculptor

She got off the train at dusk,
her silken dress blowing gently,
my father rushed to get her bags.
I knew she must be pretty then,
though I was too far away to see.

She came from the EAST, was my
mother's family, had some of the money.
Still she was far away, talked strangely,
hardly noticed me. I was about six then,
in second grade and I watched her slenderness

as I watched watersnakes in the irrigation
ditch, lovely, but not to be touched.
One day they called the school together
and we all listened to her, my cousin,

as she showed her sculptures, talked,
somehow I understood, perceived, grew
proud as her real life flashed, dimmed.
Later that day, I came around the house

she was bathing naked in a great tub,
she saw me, laughed, waved me closer,
I remember the soap on her skin, her smell
smooth breasts and nipples, marbled

by memory, I can't picture her eyes,
only her hands as they stroked me.
How angry my mother was, how strangely
guilty Father looked, putting her on the train,
as it pulled out into the blazing days
that lay before us all . . .

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# Pecos Valley Poems

It was a different world then,
I tell my children, as men have
always done. There were two hotels
—the Commercial and the Rio Pecos—
over there. Your grandfather
carried people and baggage in his wagon
from the train station down there
up to the hotels and the people
were fed and given rooms and in
the evenings used to sit out on
big porches and stare at customers
of the other hotel next door.

Or maybe they'd walk down to
the drug store and have a coke
or walk across the street and look
into the window of the dry goods
store or the grocery. It was really
quiet at night. You can't imagine
how still everything became. Lights
out at seven for most people, not
much electricity in the homes, no
body on the road that let off across
the mesa to magical places with
unfamiliar names

One evening
a bunch of people were listening
to election results on the drug
store's radio and two headlights
like puma eyes appeared out of
the mesa's darkness and one man said,
"Now would you just look at that!
Some damn fool out there on the road,
and after dark, too!" That's the way
it was in those small villages
along the glittering Pecos, those days.

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NANCY CARDOZO

# Swamp Maple

for Matthew Josephson

I

Red feather
last night
placed on the pasture

between the brook
and the yellow wood
beyond your garden.

Scents of phlox
linger—we sat
on the iron chairs

drinking gin,
talking of love,
the cost of living.

Sweet juniper,
mint, cigarettes—
the tone of your words,

that too remains,
and your shy upward look
as if for a sign.

It was summer still
when we knew each other
before the leaves turned.

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II

I walked beneath these maples
across the worn grass—on the steps
you waited dressed in white,

blue shadows of the porch touching your shoulders.
I see you now as then between the columns
watching the view. It has not changed—

along the tumbled walls, the asters,
the brook ringing its stones,
and in the pasture one tree

bright before frost.
You are looking for a phrase,
for consummation. I tell you

all is the same in the rooms
where no one died—the piano is played
in the lamplight and wood-ash

eddies at night around your books
and papers. Somehow in spite of yourself
you established generations

under the eaves where now the wasp's
fine anger builds—you cannot hear it.
You raise your right hand to your ear

in fond salute. How can I answer
that all is well with what you left
for the time being which is all we have?

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DAN MASTERSON

# Opening Doors

He remembered to ease back on the key
before turning to the left. It clicked
open and the tin weatherstripping creaked
as he stepped inside.

Something rushed over him; he went to his knees
and found himself making the sign of the cross:
forehead, breastbone, shoulder, shoulder.
It was as though he'd tried to take a breath
underwater. He stayed put

And pushed the door shut without looking
back. He was staring at the red-ribbed chair
where his father should be, the slippers
under the footstool, a brown cardigan laid
over the armrest for a moment
three weeks ago. In front of him

Was the blanket his mother kept
on the davenport for the naps that gave her
strength for lunch at the kitchen table.

The door swung in at his touch, settling
against the side of the stove. There were dishes
in the drainer, and others left undone
from that last breakfast: two coffee cups
and saucers, a napkin folded at its place,
a plate whose toast was gone.

The door to the back hall was closed,
the skeleton key dangling on its rubberband
from the doorknob. He opened it a crack
and listened; the refrigerator hummed

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at full blast. Inside, he saw a half loaf
of bread, some eggs in the door-rack. Three
covered bowls held leftovers from October.

The backdoor key was where it belonged,
on the cuphook near the dustpan. He took
the four steps down and started outside, but
came back in and latched the storm door,
leaving the other ajar. He went downstairs,
flicking the switch with the jolt it always needed.

Near the furnace, beneath the bare bulb,
he took out the list. At the washtubs, he pulled
the lightstring and squatted at the hot water
tank, thumbing the dust from the dial.
He forced it left and heard the pop.

There were three shirts and a nightgown
on the clothesline that stretched to the fruitcellar.
He dragged his hand across them and turned
the handle of the door he'd helped build.
It needed an upward yank. The high window
was black with paint, but the ceiling switch,
once too high to reach, sent light across the shelves
of canning jars, their rubber rings dried out
in open tins, pans, vases, trays, cardboard boxes
wilting along the seams.

He took the stairs one at a time, almost
starting to count them, but picked up a clothespin
instead. He carried it to the landing and set it
down on the top rim of the milkchute.

Out back, the garage door was locked, the key
out of sight. The lawnmower was wrapped
in oily canvas, the patio chairs stacked
in the corner, the rolled awning, the chipped
white basin still half full of sand for grandchildren.
The red shovel, his own, there on its nail
for fifty years. He lowered the door

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and headed for the house, wondering if anyone
saw him, if he should wave.

On the sunporch, he opened the drapes
and attached a timer to the radio. Two others.
One for the floorlamp at the foot of the stairs,
and the last, the guest room reading light.
New bulbs for both.

His parents' bedroom door was closed.
He wished he could keep it that way. Inside,
the gooseneck lamp was bent low over a saucer
with a spoon upside down in a dried puddle,
a small brown bottle standing close to its cap,
its label toward the wall.
He made the bed and hung his father's robe
on the back of the closet door. The armoire

Was locked. The strongbox was safe
on the bottom shelf, its key in the sock drawer.
There was more than he'd supposed, but he took it
all, filling the suitcase with deeds and stocks,
wills and bonds. He closed
the double doors and locked them.

He sat on the bed and started to give in
to everything around him, but shook it off
and went to his mother's side of the room. Things
were in order. She'd probably stayed awake
that last night, tidying and sorting,
vaguely agreeable, unaware she was walking
through the house for the last time.

He could see the backyard from their window.
It was filling up with snow. He emptied both
drawers of jewelry into a second suitcase and sat
on the bed. He lay back and let it come, all
the summer visits he'd spent there, the talks
with his father, the papers that would take over
at his death: what would become of Mother,
the house, the land.

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There was a washcloth next to the sink
and he soaked it. He buried his face in it.
He wrung it out and took a towel
from the linen closet. He left the cloth to dry
on the edge of the tub and dropped the towel
down the laundry chute,
wondering what would become of it.

MARK PERLBERG

## What Happened in the Woods

I scarcely think the boys invented it all—
it's such a complicated story.
They were biking home after a movie
on the path that angles through the forest preserve—
it parallels the main street in town, a few blocks west—
when Kevin skidded into the grass to avoid
what might have been a shadow or a hole.
A wood turtle, big as a soup bowl, stared up at the boys,
its head way out of its leathery shell.
As they kneeled to examine the creature,
up through a grove of alder on the river side of the path
a figure of mist rose,
gathered in the rough shape of a man,
though you couldn't tell if it was man or woman—
but it was no way human.
Think of a cowl, a robe of mist.
It crossed the path and lingered beside the bikes
resting against some trees.
The boys froze. They stood opposite,

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naked as fingers held to test the wind,
but there was no wind,
or any rag or scrap of mist rising off the river.
They dropped down in a grove of birches.
Above, a pair of dark birds circled.
Soon, the leaves of the trees nearby
stood erect in the air,
and a second figure of mist
drifted from the river toward the bikes.
Overhead, the birds kept turning, turning.
After a time the pair—tuned to what design?—
moved back across the path in a kind of waver
and melted into some trees.
The boys sprang on their bikes—
there were still two hours of daylight—
and fled like a single bowshot,
but not before my Kevin marked the spot
with a crumpled beer can.

A year—to the day—after the boys saw
whatever it was they saw,
a pair of girls was murdered in the woods.
Their tormentor was never found.
Where they lay, canceled, discarded, strewn among leaves
near the river,
someone, some thing, had hung a can
all rusted over.
It swung from a branch by a muddy twist
of rope.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

# George Balanchine 1904–1983

A FEW YEARS AGO, after the premiere of his spooky ballet about Robert Schumann, *Davidsbündlertänze*, George Balanchine said in an interview that for the finale, after the tormented artist-hero (Adam Lüders) wandered away into the mists of madness or death, what he had really intended was for a flood to engulf the stage. To me this extraordinary statement revealed a great deal about Balanchine's relation to his own work. Despite his denials of autobiographical intentions, the *Davidsbündlertänze*, like all Balanchine ballets, is intensely personal. Besides, it's riddled with *à clef* references to the choreographer/composer, his moods and his muses. For Balanchine to say essentially "*après moi le déluge*" was an astonishing admission and perhaps a bleak prognosis for the future of the New York City Ballet.

George Balanchine's presence was so dominant in NYCB that the dancers, the scenic presentation, the musical investiture, all seem to operate with the same value system, even in ballets not choreographed by Balanchine. The company's look is not like any other: pared down to the essentials, even in its most flowery gestures toward traditional nineteenth-century ballet; opulent in its use of the classical idiom, even when it veers into modernism. Balanchine shared with nearly all contemporary dance artists a severe ambivalence about the past and an indifference to the future. He treasured his own roots in the Russian classical tradition, and seemed at times even more devoted to the literature of nineteenth-century music and art. But he had no taste for turning the repertory into a stable of war-horses or for keeping his own past work in some kind of perpetual animation where it could be experienced and savored by the audience. What he cared about was the ballets he was making. I think it must have been this attitude, reinforced and institutionalized by those around him, and not pure ego, that made the New York City Ballet the uniquely contemporary and personal company that it was. As long as Balanchine's genius could supply the repertory with invention, who needed museum pieces? Only this spring Lincoln Kirstein—chief raisonneur of the Balanchine mystique—was quoted as saying the NYCB's mission was to "annihilate history . . . to canonize the New." But actually, Balanchine's purpose was neither to create something entirely new nor to perpetuate something entirely traditional. It was simply to make ballets. In the process, his originality permeated everything. The same could be said of

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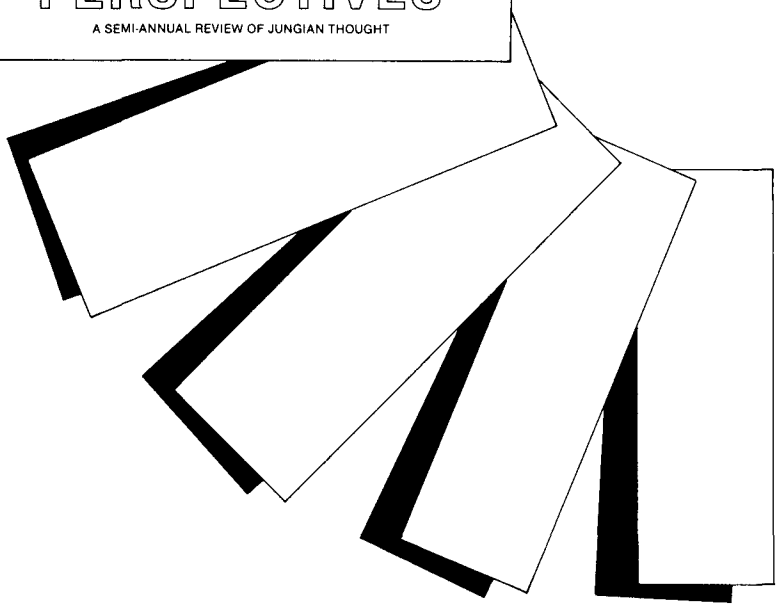

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most great artists, including Balanchine's musical mentors Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, and Mozart.

Still, no great ballet company can survive on the day-to-day production of a single artist. Repertory—the dance equivalent of a library or a museum—serves the present as much as the past. It not only shelters the works of former times, it furnishes the dancers with things to do, helps them learn range and expression, offers the audience a variety of attractions. The New York City Ballet is a true repertory company in spite of the fact that it doesn't do standard ballet classics. Thanks to Lincoln Kirstein's perseverance, Balanchine was provided with the means every choreographer needs, and few Americans are granted, to reach his fullest development. What the NYCB is today—what it has been for the past thirty-five years—is as accurate a record as there will ever be of George Balanchine's art. It is not, however, a static record. It evinces the same reservations about the past that Balanchine himself did, and, being committed neither to totally fixed images nor to totally ephemeral ones, it gives out an aura of precariousness that's not entirely unpleasant.

To provide a working environment for a resident artist, a ballet company manipulates an intricate and unstable mix of conditions. It must keep a big enough repertory of old ballets to attract a big enough audience to sustain enough performances to keep enough dancers on the payroll for enough of the year, so that the process of making new ballets isn't subordinated to improvised allotments of time, space and bodies. Even when he had to put up with less than optimum resources Balanchine was able to create. He made some of his masterpieces as a freelance choreographer working with unfamiliar dancers (i.e., *Symphony in C*, for the Paris Opera Ballet in 1947), others as classroom exercises for his School of American Ballet student recitals (the legendary *Serenade* in 1934) or as once-only items for special ballet evenings at the Metropolitan Opera, where he found a temporary refuge for his dancers in the thirties (the first *Jeu de Cartes* and *Baiser de la Fee* in 1937). Once the City Ballet was established in 1948, he managed to turn the cumbersome machinery of permanence to his own account.

He avoided the worst pitfalls of repertory—the staleness and mechanical delivery that comes with repeating works many times—by keeping at his old works as if they were new. Not only did he rehearse the ballets himself, galvanizing the dancers and inspiring them with his ideas, but he worked at the choreography. Scarcely a season went by that he wouldn't change things a little—adding and subtracting passages, respacing, revising steps. When ballets had been inactive he'd forget them and have to rethink the music. For the audience, which became increasingly familiar with NYCB over the years, surprises were always a prospect. Instead of having to witness the erosion that usually befalls old ballets after a few seasons, we found invention everywhere.

The loss of these small renovations is going to be the first sign of

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Balanchine's leaving us. His hospitalization for most of the 1982–83 season meant there were no new ballets, but I always imagined him sending bulletins off to the theater about changes he'd thought up for this or that standard work. Perhaps, I thought, he even asked one or two dancers to come see him, and gave them new things. And I realized, the first performance I saw after his death, that the extra attentiveness with which I'd always watched Balanchine ballets would no longer be rewarded. By keeping dancers and audience from growing too sure of the ballets, Balanchine created a climate of immediacy and alertness that was very modern in character. Merce Cunningham had to overthrow all the rules of academic ballet and devise a completely new set of hierarchies to achieve the same thing.

Along with changes in the choreography came changes in the dancing style and the dancers themselves. Films of New York City Ballet dancers in the fifties or even the sixties show us a very different set of bodies, skills, dynamics from the ones we know now. The positive side of ballet's ephemerality is its affirmation of life and change. New York City Ballet, through its school and its performing ranks, simultaneously hands down an old tradition and fosters the learning of new standards. What an Edward Villella could do fifteen years ago, boys in the corps can do today. Students in the School are already learning Merrill Ashley's feats. Never satisfied with what the dancers could do, Balanchine invented ways to make them surpass themselves. There are different versions of Balanchine ballets around, and different ways of dancing them. These are interesting, and we may even be fond of them, but the best way to see Balanchine is the way he's danced at the New York City Ballet.

The size and longevity of the company have also made possible a tremendous individuality. In the journalistic backlash that has followed quickly on the journalistic canonization of Balanchine, we hear a lot of sour comments about the supposed tyranny of his taste in physical types. Some people—who evidently never look at performances—would have us believe that the New York City Ballet dancer is an anorectic, inbred freak with disproportionate measurements and a head full of fluff. No doubt there are dancers like that, but there are far more who are not. Sometimes I look at the NYCB corps and think I've never seen so many stunning women at one time. Even more than the ill-perceived heterogeneity among physical types, what makes the dancers so singular is the individual *way* they dance. This too is sometimes counted against the company. They are accused of looking rhythmically and spatially imprecise in the mass formations of their rare academic-reproduction ballets. But since the dance spectator's standards are totally conditioned by the performances he himself has witnessed, perhaps we judge any *Swan Lake* ensemble on the basis of productions that have been petrified through over-reverent repetition. For all I know, the original Maryinsky corps was as eccentric as NYCB is now.

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When I look at contemporary European or American companies that are supposed to be the most respectably classical—the Basel Ballet, for instance, or the Houston under Ben Stevenson—some essential quality of dancing seems left out. I note the neat formations, the clean line, the good taste, but I'm not excited, I'm not even caught up in the stage event. As soon as I get to the NYCB again, I see what I missed. All NYCB dancers dance like soloists. Not only do they have above-average technical ability, they command the space around them. They don't make some mimetic pretense of authority but possess it through their dancing alone. They don't merely show you a shape, a direction, a step; they energize a gesture all the way out to the fingertips, articulate their movement through the whole of its trajectory. They can phrase the music like vocalists, show you minute inner rhythms, take expressive liberties. You can see faces in the back row of the NYCB corps, not purposely neutral masks. You can see that what the dancers are doing affects them—gives them a high, gives them a pain.

One of the reasons they behave this way is that Balanchine's choreography is an extraordinarily soloistic, intimate form, even when it swells into huge productions like *Union Jack* and *Vienna Waltzes*. His choreographic structures, big or small, symmetrical or free-form, all seem to begin with the irreducible unit of one principal dancer or couple. What happens in the ballet is an extension or a reflection of the principal dancers' actions. In a Balanchine ballet you seldom see the corps in decorous, metronomic ranks filling up the stage with unremarkable motion. Instead you most often see small groups of three to six dancers working together doing difficult steps, intricate counterpoint, inventive floor patterns. In any other company, corps dancers exist to provide some choreographic cotton batting for the soloists' designs. In NYCB, despite the size of the company (over sixty-five dancers below principal and soloist rank), you learn many of the corps dancers' names because Balanchine demands that you see them.

Even when he employs his corps in hierarchical ways, Balanchine tailors their gestures and rhythms to the style, role, or mood of the solo subject. He seems to have thought of each ballet as an interactive event between the soloists, the ensemble, and the music. No other ballet choreographer can be "read" in such an integrated way. Though they seldom resort to stories or even to the boy-meets-girl-boy-loses-girl-fate-reconciles-them scenarios typical of ballet lore, Balanchine ballets are nevertheless dramatic events of the most gripping kind, because we either don't know what the resolution will be, or we don't know how a foregone conclusion will be arrived at. And the only way we can find out is through the dancing.

The most balletically conventional of his situations is the one where the ensemble acts as a frame to set off the soloists. In its most grandiose and pristine form this is *Symphony in C*. In each of four sections, a central duo is accompanied by two secondary couples and a small group of attendants who echo, amplify, and display

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their movements. Each section is a small ballet in itself, and the scale is dramatically enlarged in the finale, when all the dancers return and a total ensemble of twenty-eight women backs up the eight auxiliary couples and the four solo couples in a spectacle as forthright as a chorus line. The 1945 *Symphonie Concertante*, originally made for Balanchine's School of American Ballet students and reconstructed for American Ballet Theater this year from a Labanotation score, seems related to *Symphony in C* in its formality, its purely classical architecture and its academic steps. But its basic unit is a two-woman duo that metamorphoses partway through into a trio with the entrance of a lone male. The twenty-two-woman corps sets off these two central units by showing us the different floor and step patterns possible in multiples of two and three dancers. The corps almost always works in symmetrically divided blocks of eight, eight, and six dancers. The point seems to be that symmetry, or at least equality, can be maintained whether there are two dancers or three at the core of the pattern.

When he becomes even more inventive, the strict rankings and role-identifications break down; more and more importance is given to the secondary dancers, fewer and fewer of the expectations he sets us up for get fulfilled. Balanchine ballets all have the hidden agendas of the classics; what occurs in them always has reference to classical suppositions—the primacy of the ballerina-star, for instance, or the set form of the pas de deux—although the suppositions are often questioned or denied. I think of the tiara-and-tutu ballets in which he invents an extra woman, who has no designs on the man but who refocuses the ballet when the central pair is absent. (In *Tchaikovsky Concerto No. 2* I see her as a modern descendant of the Lilac Fairy.) Or the two-woman ballets where a man is introduced long after we've forgotten he's missing (*Concerto Barocco*). Or the partner-ballets where no one is the exclusive partner of anyone else (*Divertimento No. 15*), or the ones where no one gets a partner until very late in the game (*Who Cares* part I, *Stravinsky Violin Concerto*). Or the story ballets without a story (*Bugaku*, *Donizetti Variations*, *La Sonnambula*). Or the modern ballets where it looks like all bets are off, until you realize you're seeing the whole classical game through a trick lens (*Agon*) or possibly in reverse (*Four Temperaments*). This list goes on and on. Because he stuck to classicism, Balanchine gave his audience and himself a field for exploration.

In *Serenade* he tore himself drastically from the classical anchorage. He had, after all, just abandoned Europe and cast his lot with Kirstein in the great American experiment. *Serenade* preserves almost none of the conventional roles, spacings, proportions. And yet, it never loses its formality or throws away the classical vocabulary. With it Balanchine made a virtue and maybe even a practice of expediency. He had only students at his disposal when he made it, not a professional company, and it's said he devised it out of what

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his forces could do and who showed up each day to rehearse. Whatever the cause, the ballet's form and its order keep shifting. The ensemble of seventeen women splinters into subgroups of many different sizes—some of them flit amorphously across the stage before you can do more than sense their passage; others gather in staid ranks and didactically perform unpredictable gesture sequences; still others do slightly deranged fragments of nineteenth-century ballets, as if the phrases had been taught to them by someone with a fond but faulty memory. Certain women emerge momentarily into prominence, but only quite late in the ballet is there any extended, properly displayed dancing by principals. What looks at the beginning as if it's going to be a classroom demonstration transforms itself subtly into something like another couple ballet, but before we settle into this mode, it all turns into a tragic allegory of, perhaps, the struggle between youthful beauty and death.

*Serenade* might be the model Balanchine ballet if we had to make such a choice. It's like an impressionist painting, with its glimpses of mood, tone, period that dissolve into each other before any fixed image can be captured. Balanchine puts glints and streaks of suggestive movement into a floating background, evoking a whole array of illusions that might have remained below the surface. In great measure his success depends on the way he used Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings as an unstoppable tide on which the action is carried along. The dance neither gathers in little pointed rhythmic clumps nor lingers for effect nor forces the momentum into emphatic strokes—things that nineteenth-century ballet assumes you can do to music. And although he didn't often use such sweeping, romantic music, the sense of movement as an urgent, overriding propellant is characteristic of all his ballets.

Though it's easier to notice the crooked wrists or the sometimes aberrational placement or the deliberately exaggerated line of a Balanchine dancer, these are less important aspects of his style than his concept of dance time. Balanchine choreographed what is called in music a "through line." That is, his notion of dancing was that the movement keeps on going just as the melody does in a score. He didn't choreograph isolated steps, or neat 4/4 mouthfuls, or even strenuous blasts of virtuosic show followed by self-satisfied poses. Important steps like jumps or pirouettes are, in Balanchine, treated like transitional steps; the dancer lands only to take off again without adjusting, centering, or resting in between. This was one of the things Mikhail Baryshnikov had the most trouble with in the year he danced with NYCB; he was used to conventional stop-and-go dancing. In thinking of movement as a progression rather than as a series of exclamations, Balanchine also considered as dancing certain elements of the vocabulary usually thrown away as mere linkages, like the five foot positions or the functional walking step. And in thus bringing movement into a closer analogy with music, he made possible for himself a variety of musical game-plans

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far more sophisticated than anyone else has devised. Dancers are heard to speak a lot of starstruck mystical stuff about why they adored working for Balanchine, but I should think the tremendous possibilities he made for them to exercise their art would have been reason enough.

No one who loves Balanchine wants to think about what will become of the many things he means to us now that he's gone. We can't hope for the miracle of a choreographer to fill his shoes. The company and school, I suppose, will survive as institutions are meant to do, changing season by season to accommodate the lesser leaders who will have to replace him. I have less confidence than some people in the future of the repertory. It will be preserved, of course, and some pains have been taken in recent years to document it in film, videotape and notation. But probably it will slip in tiny ways—detail will fuzz out, new dancers will try to capture its drive and not know how, vitality will ebb away. Dancers will be afraid to take liberties as they do now, because the people in charge will be more concerned with keeping ballets the same than with giving them room to grow. But they'll still be deeper and more interesting than other ballets. I think we can count on that.

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VERNON YOUNG

# Journeys to the Edge

AGAINST A SETTING which might have been designed for a performance of *The Seven Against Thebes*, the Fifty-Fifth (and worst, for all I know) Annual Oscar Award Ceremony took place earlier this year, endorsing Mr. Eliot's choice of April as the cruelest month. Nothing now could be more fruitless than to nominate films or personalities which could have been temporarily immortalized in place of those which were. I simply want to speak a few ill-natured words on *Gandhi* before it enters the smugly unarguable list of Great Movies, with the assistance of many near and dear to me whom I had thought of as intelligent friends.

What in the name of God was the elder Attenborough brooding over for twenty years (by his count), only to come up with the safe, superficial interpretation he assembled in this script? There is not a clue in his chronicle to Gandhi's inward torment, his spiritual casuistry, his resources of will and his piecemeal surrender of the ego in order to gain an indomitable self, sufficiently integrated and formidable to bring down an empire; not a whisper of the repellent and tortuous private personality explored, for clinical example, by Arthur Koestler. Attenborough's Gandhi has no pre-existence in a teeming, feudal society, animated by ancient mysticisms, torn by rival creeds, impeded by grotesque sexual suppressions. As we see him, this Gandhi is an ingratiating Oxbridge rebel whose opposition to British rule and Moslem dissent was conducted almost entirely at the forensic level, moved by sociological concepts familiar to the average viewer in the Western cinema audience. (Incidentally, the few scenes between Gandhi and his wife are monumentally trite and quite devoid of intimacy!)

Beyond the individual, the land: but in this version we are treated to no unforgettable images of torrential heat and perennial drought, of street-sleeping hordes, pullulating masses of cripples and beggars, the endless drone, the intermittent beauty sullied by mongrel accretions of an ill-digested Western commerce: all the ambience I personally recall from a visit in the thirties, and recapitulated a hundred times over by observers as far apart (in time, media and perspective) as Aldous Huxley, film-makers Arne Sucksdorf and Louis Malle, and the "colonial" Indian, V. S. Naipaul (most pungently in *An Area of Darkness*). I can best summarize my disdain for this bland, deadening movie by noting that it tells you nothing about the subject you didn't already know. Worse than that, it tells

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you *less* than you already knew! The hype emanating from Warner Brothers and from Mr. Attenborough himself is pious bait for all those revisionist liberals who quake at the thought of criticizing adversely a movie on so sanctified an historical monument as Mahatma Gandhi.

I'd not want to attribute a major share of the film's ineptness to Ben Kingsley, a fine Shakespeare-trained actor who happened to be born in India (which, of course, has nothing to do with whatever veracity he projected). He could not have very far departed from the guidelines of the scenario, had he been so minded. Kingsley's undemonstrative physical poise and his gamut of vocal inflection are exploited to brilliant advantage in *Betrayal* where, as the unruffled cuckold, Robert, he is played off against Jeremy Irons (Jerry, the lover of his wife) who is all elbows, sprawl and multiple histrionics when he pours a drink. If Patricia Hodge had been level with the two actors, this would have been the perfect film of its kind. As it is, it's nearly perfect: just top-heavy for want of an actress who could make you believe in her declaration to Jerry that she couldn't *bear* to live without him!

An earlier instance of this film's structure—the flashback that never returns to the "present" for resolution—was that of a play by George Kaufman (early thirties) that began at the terrifying denouement of a twenty-year relationship among members of the same graduating class. The first-last act took place at a party, with one woman throwing acid in the face of another, just before the curtain fell. From this violent terminus the action moved backward through deteriorating encounters to the bright inception, a young man delivering his hopeful valedictory address. I thought it very effective but the play was a commerical failure. More than likely, the method was too painful for theatergoers unwilling to support the pathos of the irreversible. *Betrayal* is not a tragedy, however; and the situation barely attains pathos. For the men involved, the outcome is reconciliation after a waste of time; they are closer to one another than before and our strongest emotion is one of faint sadness, engendered by the unheroic consequences of infidelity.

With full credit given to the actors and their director, David Jones, the essential style is determined by the idiosyncratic wit of Harold Pinter's dialogue, its objective not so much to conceal passions (assuming there were any, *sub rosa*, worthy of the name) as to construct deception in a civil tongue, spoken by characters whose syntax is never for long out of sync. "Anyway, I'm *delighted* to see you!" Emma tells Jerry, ages after the submerged affair. And he: "So am I! . . . That is, *I'm* delighted to see *you*!" Or, remember the meticulous chronology recited by Robert, step by step, as he patiently explains the gambit to his needlessly distraught friend and usurper. "She couldn't have told me last night. She told me four years ago. . . . So it wouldn't have been necessary for her to tell me last night. . . . Because I already knew."

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This *is* a talk-movie: more stimulating, I thought, than *My Dinner With Andre* (which was no less well directed); it took place at more than one table and wasn't dedicated, au fond, to nostalgia for the damned silly life-way of the sixties; and superior by far to Eric Rohmer's *Le Beau Mariage*, almost wholly a monologue by one bird-brained girl. Yet any of these films, compared with *Local Hero* and its arch trivialities, does serve as a reminder that comedy at its best is an art of limits, within which, until the author rings a bell, neither common sense nor farcical parentheses are permitted to damage the controlling tone.

*Tender Mercies*, neither comedy nor tragedy, has the kind of driving simplicity by which the purer forms are often enhanced. The best American film of the season (in my experience) was directed by an Australian, the Bruce Beresford who made *Breaker Morant*. When, some years ago, I lived and traveled in the Southwest, I found myself frequently at a crossroads called a town where there was little but wind, asphalt and thistles, a motel, a gas station, a diner and people who pronounced *thing* as *theng*. I feel sure that after my hamburger and coffee I murmured for the tenth time, as I took the wheel, "Christ! Imagine living in a place like this!" . . . *Tender Mercies* is about a place like this and the respect (considerably deeper than mine) with which Beresford and his scenarist, Horton Foote, have given the place identity and human significance is an exceptional achievement. The Hollywood-based writer is seldom prepared (or seldom given liberty) to shape a man from the morass of commonplace experience and, with a minimum of contrivance, let him speak for himself: a figure that needs heavy qualification here, since the ex-country-rock singer played by Robert Duvall has no speech, in our sense, at his command. Which may be why he composes lyrics: he can sing it but he can't say it.

Mack Sledge is trying to dry out from a career ended by alcoholism; all that the movie consists of is his muted but visibly eloquent effort to get hold of himself while he works for his meals at a gas station and courts, in his wordless fashion, the young widow who runs the property. Very little of a spectacular nature occupies the screenplay. Reminiscent of an old classical pattern (and in this respect alone, of *Betrayal*), everything disastrous or promising has transpired before the brief curve of life selected by the author. And none of our conditioned expectations comes to pass. Sledge has no difficulty persuading the woman to marry him and no problem of adjustment to her and her small boy thereafter. Nor, when he experiences as before the single ongoing frustration that threatens his recovery—his ex-wife's refusal to let him meet with their daughter—does Mack relapse into alcoholic evasion or an outbreak of aimless aggression. He climbs back into himself and works out in his own labyrinth a way of coming to terms with a world which seems intent on baffling him. The world continues to do so. On the verge of a renewed relationship with his daughter, which the girl has initi-

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ated in defiance of her mother, she and her newly wed husband are killed in a car accident (which you do not witness!). Mack is left digging in the ground of the motel, bursting with vexation for which he has no relieving melody of language, asking his new wife the question to which neither she nor anyone on earth has the answer: *Why?*

That's all. It is Robert Duvall's film. He fills the view. He is inside the man written down for him. My immediate reaction, as I sought to generalize what I had seen, was the renewed belief that the unconscious life is not worth living—followed by the reflection that if *I* don't live it, someone else must. And if in any measure I am able to recognize the value of his choice—if it is a choice—it is largely because an actor such as Duvall has, with selfless art, simulated his alien existence.

*La Nuit de Varennes* (Italian-French co-production) is beautifully impure; it includes more of life: plays with the ridiculous, embraces history (a segment), talks almost incessantly yet evokes an impression of fevered movement and downward crisis. Between mutations of the French Revolution, Louis XVI has fled to Metz, hoping to rally his supporters in Alsace. Fright is in the air; the countryside is restless; hatreds are on short leash. An assorted company of lesser nobility and intellectuals is traveling towards Metz from Paris. Prominent among them are Restif de la Bretonne, professional gossip and author of pornographic novels; a Comtesse and her hairdresser who fail to conceal from the alert and nosy Restif that they are on the way to join the royal household; the American libertarian, Thomas Paine; and an aging Casanova who, like Restif, joins the company en route. Nearly everyone is in flight. Restif is escaping his creditors and following his nose. Casanova is escaping, he thinks, from the service of Count Mannheim. Only Tom Paine seems to be along for the ride and of course to supply the scenario with democratic arguments. By journey's end, each of these characters has been driven to a degree of self-exposure, by the presence of the others, the arduousness of the passage or the winds of change.

Restif, whose manners are more selective than his morals, is closer to appreciating the virtues of conduct; Tom Paine has been moved to acknowledge that in the fierce loyalty of the Comtesse there is an integrity that eludes his chatter of the Rights of Man; the Comtesse, herself, pushed to extremity by a molesting tramp, by scornful arguments from Paine and a student Republican—above all by the unexpected arrest of the King at Varennes—confesses that in royal patronage lies not only her ideal but her security. And her pathetic hairdresser, who appears at first to be merely a parasol-toting epicene, unburdens himself of his omnipresent fear: abandoned lackeys, like ownerless pets, are stoned to death. Casanova endures apart, with his gluttony and his letters of credit, a personage in the grand manner—aloof, sadly vain, disenchanted by

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impotence. One of the many subtle touches illuminating, en passant, the curious divisions of sensibility that marked the age is Casanova's farewell to Restif, adjuring the writer, upon his return to Paris, to look up Goldoni, who is in danger of starving to death in a garret. Five minutes before, he had received with indifference the ostler's report that his horse's heart had burst.

All the principal actors are as good as or better than they have ever been. As Casanova, Marcello Mastroianni is sovereign; and it was a relief, after all these years, to see Jean-Louis Barrault as a substantial lecher (Restif) instead of a veil of smoke; a relief, also, to see the beautiful Hanna Schygulla (Comtesse) freed from the world of Fassbinder's cinema in which she had for so long been incarcerated—and making it unnecessary for me to send her a cake with a file in it.

I found the film over-didactic and the framing devices superfluous. Italian invention is habitually *de trop*. Even so, Ettore Scola (director) and Sergio Amidei (co-writer) produced an entertainment that engages the mind while remaining *visual*. In the long run (from Paris to Limbo), you may well remember, indelibly, the whips and the wheels, the dust by day and the torches by night, the citizens of Varennes crying havoc on their captured king (all we see of him is his feet), the Comtesse curtsying to royal robes on a dressmaker's dummy and, in the person of Casanova, the lust of the flesh canceled by the unforgivable insolence of time.

Jan Troell's *The Flight of the Eagle* pictures another journey to the edge of things but this one is utterly irreclaimable, doomed from the start to failure and protracted death. In 1897 a Swedish military engineer, Major Andree, persuaded two younger volunteers to accompany him on a flight to the North Pole from Spitzbergen in a hydrogen-gas balloon, certainly one of the most misbegotten and ill-prepared adventures in the history of sponsored exploration. Almost from the start, their chances of survival, let alone success, were reduced to zero. Against advice and in the teeth of quickly mounting obstacles, Andree insisted on their takeoff, while phrasing his demands as if they were the result of free choice on the part of his companions who, in fact, suppressed their reluctance out of loyalty to the ingratiating tyranny of their obsessed leader. (This, at any rate, is the interpretation of the novelist from whose book, *Expeditionen*, Troell made his epic film.) Within hours of their starting-point, their guide-ropes were useless, they had thrown most of their ballast overboard and the balloon was patently unsteerable. They were totally at the mercy of the elements. After sixty-five hours, with the Pole an unreachable 800 kilometers distant, they were forced to abandon the expiring "Eagle" and trek in whichever direction they could manage across the whitest hell I have ever seen photographed. Drifting southward on ice-floes, packing their improvised drags over frozen barricades, a terrain where nothing stirred except gales, currents beneath the ice and polar bears (their

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larder and their fate), suffering from dysentery, exhaustion and unacknowledged hopelessness, the men became the sum of their viscera and their Swedish stoicism. Thirty-three years later, their bodies, frozen, shriveled and half devoured by bears, were found by Norwegian sailors. With their skeletons were found photographs they had taken, many of which are featured in Troell's film.

*The Flight of the Eagle* is distinguished from other wilderness movies of its kind not only by the futile magnitude of the undertaking it recreates and by the customary blend of lyricism and starkness of which Troell is a past master, but further by the lacerating psychological inquest of its chief antagonist, Major Andree (another magnificent stricken-oak performance from Max von Sydow), who, the evidence appears to indicate, sacrificed the lives of two young men to his compulsive hunger for posthumous fame. There have been few moments as harrowing as Knut Fraenkel's delayed outburst, when he confronts Andree with the truth about himself, then experiences a rush of self-reproach upon realizing that one of them will unquestionably survive, for a term, *alone*, and know "no more of himself than he can see in a pocket mirror." The two men, in sobbing embrace, backed by the pristine Arctic landscape, is a sight I found almost unendurable to watch.

I did think that the exposition was overlong, structured from the necessity for later providing the men with subjects for their hallucinations. The ordeal that ensues is so intensively unrelieved that we are led to the very brink of toleration. But this film is touched by greatness; it confirms my insistence, for seventeen years now, that Jan Troell (in this case director, co-writer, cinematographer and editor) is unsurpassed by any film-maker of our time.

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GERALD WEALES

# In Search of Theater in France

ONE NIGHT WE DROVE SEVENTY KILOMETERS across the Vaucluse, from Apt to Rasteau, to go to a rehearsal of *Les Précieuses ridicules*. It was bad Molière and a bad rehearsal, but it was a fascinating evening all the same. It was one of the more recherché stops in a somewhat haphazard search for theater that I conducted late in 1982. A friend of mine, on leave from his university, had rented a house in the Village de Joucas, and he offered me a bed, a desk, a magnificent view and easy access to the wine, cheese and sausage of the Vaucluse. I should simply have relaxed into all that splendor, but I am incorrigible. I want to know what is going on on stage wherever I am, and my host, who suffers from a mild form of my theatrical obsession, joined me in my quest.

Our guide on the trip to Rasteau, a village in vineyard country on the northern edge of the Vaucluse, was a young man named Gilbert Bancual. He had been a literary and theatrical gypsy, living in England, the Netherlands and parts of France beyond his native Marseille. Grubstreeting in Paris, he had translated pornography and Pinter (Eric Kahane is Pinter's official translator). Now, with the financial backing of his family, textile manufacturers, he has become the keeper of a shop in Apt, but he cannot be a mercer pure and simple. He is one of a group of amateurs who put on plays in villages around the Vaucluse and, although the chaotic rehearsal indicated that the group is run on democratic principles, he is clearly the energy center of the organization. His fellow performers/producers include a schoolmaster, a prosperous farmer (his Gorgibus indicated that he best understood the Molière they were massacring), an elderly professional musician, some local young people and a few artistic drifters.

The group, as Bancual described it, has a mission, as much social as artistic. They want to bring plays to isolated villages—not as would-be missionaries carrying culture to the unenlightened, but as celebrants whose performance will be only a part of a larger festival of community in which actors and audience share food and wine, conversation and art. They want, too, to concentrate on the economic and social concerns of the local area and to emphasize what remains of the old Provençal language and customs. To this end, they usually do original plays, working from scripts that Bancual has written, but what with one pressure or another there was no

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new Bancual. So they fell back on Molière—a play that they had performed on other occasions.

The rehearsal took place a few days after a disastrous storm had swept across all of Southern Europe, carrying off, among many other things, the roof of the hall in which they usually worked. They had taken refuge in the elementary room in the Rasteau school where I perched uneasily on the edge of a desk and watched as they set up their minimal scenery, placed their lights and began the long—very long—passage through Molière's short play. Despite the dedication Bancual had described, they seemed like almost any amateur group I have known, most of them uncertain about their lines and all of them ready to break up in the face of any planned or accidental comic moment. There was no director, although business had been worked out at some point in the past, and certainly no controlling concept of what the play was about. Since most of the company have a taste for overstatement and a fondness for the vulgar, and are convinced that that is what their audiences want, they worked some odd transformations on Molière. The two women were played as lubricious country sluts, which pretty much wrecked the satirical point of *Les Précieuses ridicules,* and the schoolmaster, like many a self-indulgent professional actor, played the fake marquis as neither a valet nor a bogus aristocrat but as a performer with a reputation for being a funny fellow. A naughty Provençal song was interpolated into the script and staged to suggest that the young women have sex with the impostors, which would presumably have startled Molière but which the company obviously saw as the high point of their production. By the time the rehearsal came to an end in a wash of cheery goodbyes and many a promise to study lines, I was convinced that no phoenix could rise from these ashes of good intentions. When I ran into the musician in a bookstore in Apt a week later, he assured me that their first public performance, which I had been unable to attend, had been well received. Assuming the accuracy of his news, it either speaks well for the diligence of the group or testifies to the extent of artistic starvation in the Provençal boondocks.

I have stayed with the Rasteau amateurs so long because they represent an ideal of theater that was not reflected in any other group that I saw. They also display the idealist's ability to romanticize both his contribution to and the recipient's need of his special ministrations. The Vaucluse villages are not all that isolated. Joucas was one of the places where the group had played in the past and, although there are Joucasians who do not wander far from the village square, the local people are not completely shut off from the culture of the great world. One day I found a notice fixed to the grocery window, announcing that a bus would depart on such a day at such an hour to carry interested parties to Avignon to see *Rose-Marie,* a show that in its intention and its staging was about as far

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removed from the Rasteau Molière as one could imagine. I had already arranged to see the show.

At first glance, it may seem a bit odd that a 1924 Broadway musical should have been playing in the magnificent old theater in Avignon, but ever since the phenomenal success of Jean-Louis Barrault's revival of Offenbach's *La Vie Parisienne* at the Palais-Royal in 1958, French companies have been restaging popular operettas with a care that indicates a respect for the genre—or, at least, for the audience that still dotes on it. The elderly women who were my immediate neighbors in the packed theater had not only come for the Rudolf Friml score, which they obviously knew, but to cluck over the preposterous plot and to titter at the corny jokes. Even with my pitiful command of French I could hear the terrible puns (a compliment to the aging *femme fatale* in which *vie* somehow segued into *vieille*) that were the stock in trade of comedians in 1920s operettas. The book by Otto Harbach and Oscar Hammerstein II was considered somewhat daring in 1924 because there is a murder to fuel the melodrama, but now it can be seen and appreciated as the obvious hokum it is; the first act curtain, in which Rose-Marie uses "Indian Love Call" as a signal to Jim, sacrificing her love for him to save his life, is a director's and a designer's dream. When the light goes out in the tiny window of the tiny cabin, supposedly far away on the mountain side, we and Rose-Marie know that Jim has heard her signal, and the curtain can come down in a flood of music and tears.

The designers of the sets and costumes were the real stars of the show in Avignon, a co-production of Avignon, Marseille and Metz. There were some good voices (Patricia Jumelle as Rose-Marie, Alain Vernhes as Sergeant Malone, "*le bouledogue*"), but both the acting and the staging were unexceptional. It was the visual show that was impressive. Since *Rose-Marie* takes place in a Canada that, despite the presence of mounties and Indians, never was on land or sea, it is simply an excuse for designers to let go. Jacques Griesemer (sets) and Antoine Selva (costumes) apparently took their cue from the original production and went for art deco extravagance. Although there was nothing in Avignon to equal the fantastic costumes Charles LeMaire designed for the "Totem Tom-Tom" number in the original (I am judging by photographs), Griesemer and Selva came up with lavish foolishness that kept shouting, above the voices of the singers, isn't this preposterous and aren't you glad you came. The audience with which I saw the show clearly answered, *yes*.

Samuel Beckett also turned up in Avignon, at the ATP (Amis du Théâtre Populaire), but not one of his plays. Christian Colin, as director and performer, offered an elaborately staged *Premier amour* in a production that originated at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe de Saint-Denis. Colin, who is known for his work in plays of Molière, Shakespeare and Marlowe, was quoted in the Marseille edition of *Le Provençal* (November 17, 1982), as wanting to present the things

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that touch him, to choose authors who mesh with his own sense of reality. Beckett may be such an author, but the *Premier amour* at Avignon showed Colin speaking Beckett's words in a context that suggests that the actor's reality (theatricality) is not the same as the author's. The Beckett short story was written in 1946, several years before *Waiting for Godot,* the play that established him as a dramatist. There is a distinct narrative voice in *Premier amour,* one that an actor might well find challenging, but the narrator hero, like so many of Beckett's protagonists, is moving toward isolation. There are remembered events—his father's death, the encounter with the woman on the park bench, his moving into her apartment, his escape from her and the baby she bears—but the subject of the story is his attempt to divorce himself from the contact with people, with things, with light and most of all with sound. The story is the voice; there is no person, no place. "But to be unearthed I must first be found, and I greatly fear those gentlemen will have as much trouble finding me dead as alive." Colin chose to put the character on a ship, a very elegant liner (designed by Jean Haas), and to suggest a sentimental sense of loss in the man's disconnection. There was a door through which he went from time to time to get food or drink and from which the sound of festivities came, a cheerful noise that seemed to lure him more than it repelled him (despite Beckett's lines about the impossibility of escaping singing). An even more incredible gloss on Beckett was the lovely young woman who stood at the ship's railing all through the monologue, a character without lines or identity. A dream? A memory? An embodiment of longing? A touch of show-biz?

It was an evening in which the performer failed Beckett and Beckett failed the performer. We were not far into the play when the first dissatisfied customers left. The deserters, who were sitting in the first row, had to make the long climb to the exit doors in the rear, so their departure was the more obvious. They were a young couple, dressed in leather jackets and carrying motorcycle helmets, and, although I know that a professor of theology is as likely to be on a cycle as a rock fan is, I assumed they were theatrical neophytes sucked in by the title and expecting first love as French films have taught us it should be presented—all flesh and flora with saccharine classical background music. Then another couple left, and a third, a fourth, larger groups. By the time a bearded, tweed-jacketed man departed (I had pegged him as a professorial Beckett fancier), it was clear that the show had not found its audience. At first, I assumed that it was the Beckett voice, the absence of recognizable theatrical action, that was driving people away, but by the end of the evening, which seemed interminable, I had concluded that it was a mixture of Beckettians and anti-Beckettians that had bolted for the exit. Early on in the performance, as though he too distrusted the words, Colin began to play with every available prop; he eventually

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climbed up on the railing and used it as ladder, bed and possible springboard (there is no hint of suicide in the text). In the monologues that Beckett wrote for the theater—at least, the early ones like *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*—he provided a great deal of stage business to go with the words. Yet, Krapp's toying with his tapes and the banana and Winnie's morning ritual belong to the characters. Christian Colin's business had nothing to do with text or character; it suggested the desperation of an inventive actor who had once played Sganarelle. I would like to see Colin, a talented comedian, in another kind of play, and I would like to hear *Premier amour* (or *First Love*, Beckett's own English translation) in a reading that stuck to the rhythm of the author's words. "But there it is, either you love or you don't."

It was in Marseille that I saw the only new play I came across in the South of France. I had gone there, on the advice of an admirer of Marcel Maréchal, to investigate La Criée, the splendid new theater in which Maréchal runs the Théâtre National de Marseille. New theater, not new building. The old fish market (hence the name) in the Vieux Port has been transformed into a place where drama rather than cockles and mussels are cried up. The marvelous art nouveau front has been retained, but there is a completely new interior, pristinely white, which houses two playing areas, a small restaurant, offices, a highly mechanized ticket operation and gallery space; in the latter, I saw an exhibition, largely photographs, on the history of the Compagnie Renaud-Barrault, which seems to have a close alliance with La Criée.

*Dylan* opened in the main auditorium at about the time I visited Marseille. I was curious about Maréchal as an actor—and he does look rather like Dylan Thomas—but I had not cared much for Sidney Michaels' play when it was first done in New York in 1964 with Alec Guinness as Dylan and I had little inclination to see it in French. I chose instead to see Philippe Faure's *Biche* in the small theater. Faure is a young author, director, actor from Lyon, where he and Joëlle Bruyas run the Compagnie de la Goutte. The play, directed by the author and well acted by the company from Lyon, is about a celebrated clown—the Biche of the title. He has an established and very successful routine with his old friend Philibert, but he decides one day that he prefers to play alone and in a business suit, putting aside the familiar costume which is as much Biche as he is. *Play* is perhaps the wrong word since what he proposes to do is be silent, on the assumption that he, not what he does, is funny. Much of the play is taken up with the attempts of Biche's partner, his daughter (Bruyas's role) and the director of the theater to get him to behave in his traditional manner, but this action is largely the line on which Faure can hang ideas about the person-performer confusion, the audience as creator or receiver and the function of play-acting offstage (outside the ring in this case). As with any phi-

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losophical/poetic piece about the theater—scratch a clown and you'll find a metaphor—*Biche* worries the problem of identity; his dresser, a mute, is forced to put on the clown's costume and both is and is not Biche. The play opens when a man (the theater director, as it turns out) wanders in like a fugitive from a Magritte painting, launching the play on a fantasy note which, like some of the later behavior of the daughter, creates a tone that seems at odds with the painful crisis of Biche. In a party after the performance, I asked the author about the incident involving the daughter and, misunderstanding my question, he indicated that the daughter was a problem in general in the play. And so she is. *Biche* had, then, some weaknesses in construction, and there is something a bit *déjà vu* about its face/mask concerns. Its strength lies in its central character, particularly as Gabriel Jabbour played him, for Biche, whatever the ideational implications of his distress, comes across as a man beset.

On my way home from Joucas, I stopped in Paris for a few days where theater of some kind or another was available at every corner. Or every circle. I went first to the Théâtre du Rond-Point, less for the La Criée connections than out of my admiration for Jean-Louis Barrault. They were playing Georges Coulonges's *Les Strauss*, a long (two hours without an intermission) account of Johann Strauss, *père et fils*, which tried to be several things at once. On the most simple-minded level, it recalled the kind of composer's biography that Hollywood gave us in the 1930s and 1940s, sometimes going for tears, sometimes for laughter. At its most serious, it attempted to use the music as a vehicle for a history of the nineteenth century. The thesis is that the waltz, invented by the father in the raunchy taverns along the Danube, was a revolutionary force, coopted by the social and political establishment which saw the son's work safely enclosed in concert halls. An interesting idea, it is more commented on than presented in *Les Strauss*, as characters like Metternich, The Worker, a number of declamatory young radicals, a comic bourgeois couple (called Biedermeier, of course) speak their pieces between bursts of music and dollops of sentimental biography. It would have been much more exciting had Barrault, who directed, found a way to present the transformation of the waltz directly as it was being performed (v. the coming of Nazism in the middle of a musical number in *Cabaret*), but there was little here—except for the fairly obvious image of a train created by the moving performers—to suggest the Barrault inventiveness of past productions.

Barrault appeared in the tiny role of L'Abbé, doing foolish little dance steps in one of the waltz numbers—intentionally foolish, I assume—and again as the conductor who must interrupt the concert to announce the death of Johann II. Barrault delivered the announcement movingly—more so than the play seemed to demand—but the impressive thing about this brief appearance came at the

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beginning when he stood, his back to the audience, arms outstretched. His hands, his wrists, as the conductor commanded his invisible orchestra, had in them the expressiveness of the Barrault of *Les Enfants du Paradis.*

*Les Strauss* was the only new play I saw in Paris, and it was a new play that depended on old music. For the rest, I stuck to revivals: Jean Giraudoux's *Sodome et Gomorrhe,* Henry Becque's *Les Corbeaux,* Georges Feydeau's *Un Bain de ménage. Sodome et Gomorrhe,* in which the only action lies in the words, is not an easy play for someone whose French is as hit-and-miss as mine is. For that reason, it is probably inappropriate for me to criticize the production. Still, I could not help feeling that the director (Jean-François Prévand) had taken too literally Lia's remark, "Isn't the end of the world only a stage setting?" She means that the real subject of the play is the quarrel between her and Jean, representative figures of the connection/separation of women and men, which is true since their voices go on after the death and destruction. In the production I saw in one of the more elegant commercial theaters, stage setting meant stage setting, for the inaction took place in a handsome art deco rendering of a fashionable hillside villa and the characters were properly dressed for the place. It might have been *Private Lives.* Given Giraudoux's mixture of the contemporary and the Biblical, such a set and costumes are not inappropriate, but the stagey feel of the whole thing invoked playfulness rather than a play of ideas.

*Les Corbeaux,* having long since passed from being an outrage to becoming a classic, was back again at the Comédie-Française. Becque has always been odd-man-out among the naturalists, so different in tone from Zola and company that he seems in search of a niche all to himself. *Les Corbeaux* is relentless in its exposure of greed (i.e., good business practice), but its message is embedded in its comedy and its victims come under the scrutiny of the same cold and sardonic eye that is turned on the vultures. The domestic felicity of the first act, which obviously depends on M. Vigneron doing a little vulturing of his own outside the home, provides one of the wryest and funniest scenes in the modern repertory. The company at the Comédie caught the proper note; the members of the Vigneron family and those who come to batten on their grief were sharply observed characters, comic without ceasing to be realistic. Roland Bertin's Teissier, for instance, was a sly but bumbling bear of a man, the kind that might have been created by Michel Simon in a vintage French movie. The difficulty with the production, and to some extent with the play, came in the character of Blanche, the youngest Vigneron daughter, who, having succumbed to the charms of her fiancé, runs mad when she learns that her prospective marriage dies with her father and their fortune. I assume that the audience is asked to observe her great distress, not suffer it with her. At the Comédie, Blanche's scene with Mme. de Saint-Genis was played as high tragedy—or, at least, in grand operatic style—and

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the nice Becquian web began to disintegrate as the production seemed to ask for a response that the author had not. At one point, Anne Consigny's Blanche rocketed around the immense stage, losing her mind in a way that made the actress lose the context. This behavior was not simply a function of the interpretation, but of the stage itself. Characters rattled around in it, and the director (Jean-Pierre Vincent) emphasized the emptiness by staging a number of intimate scenes, conversations between two people, with such distance between the speakers that Becque's celebrated realistic dialogue became declamation. Altogether an odd production, calling up admiration and exasperation in equal measure.

*Revival* is not exactly the word for the production of *Un Bain de ménage* I saw, although it was certainly lively enough. Thinking that I had had enough of the grand and the institutional theaters, I found my way to a hand-to-mouth operation playing in what once must have been a wine cellar beneath a restaurant which gave its name (Le Tourtour) to the tiny theater. There, four young people (under the direction of Michel Boy, who had apparently been their teacher in theater school) had taken over Feydeau's vaudeville and transformed it. The mistaken-identity plot was still being used and the four characters had a distant relationship to those of Feydeau; and, of course, the titular bathtub still dominated the stage. A brief prologue had been provided, in which the married couple were shown as children, and the maid had been turned into a runaway convict in drag. This managed to give a touch of child sex and transvestism to a play in which the height of naughtiness lies in the maid's inability to find the master's gloves because they are in the dresser drawer beneath his underpants. To an American used to Charles Ludlam and the doings of his Ridiculous Theatrical Company these additions seemed both tame and labored, but the company was not particularly interested in them either. It was not popporn comedy but slapstick that they cared about, which meant that Feydeau's reasonably restrained contretemps were turned into pure pandemonium. Most of the actors ended up in the bathtub, wringing wet and blubbering, as they dripped and romped their way through the show. Feydeau drowned with the actors in the tub, but something genuinely theatrical survived. Unlike the usual amateurish endeavor in which improvement is a vehicle for ineptitude (I am thinking of a student production of Henry Fielding's *Tom Thumb* that I suffered through a few years ago), these four actors performed with great precision and one of them, Vincent Garanger, who played the schoolboy, looks as though he will develop into an excellent comedian.

The promise of a performer like Garanger is pure lagniappe. For me, it is the search that counts. Put it on stage, whatever it is, and, if it is not the theatrical revelation I long for, I will not turn away in despair. I will marvel at the imaginative way in which still another production has failed to meet my expectations.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

# Dealing with Decon

HUMILIATIONS ARE ALWAYS TO BE LOOKED OUT FOR, if not sought after, so I was pleased to find the English critic, John Bayley, speaking recently of a figure (resembling your reviewer) whom he called "the simplistic amateur of letters, boring students with one's own enthusiasm for stories and poems about real life and real people, even while rigorous and exciting new modes of making them unreal are being cooked up by the professionals elsewhere." Occurring in a review of Edward Said's collection of essays, it had its ironic twist since Mr. Bayley has been known to appear in print himself with expressions of enthusiasm for stories and poems, while not agonizing overmuch about how "real" or "unreal" are the life and the people in them. Of course Bayley was aware of the irony, indeed took it on as one possible response to the contemporary scene in which, as everyone knows and has already read too much about, there is a distance between those who practice literary operations which are termed "deconstructive," and those enthusiasts (or "humanists," as they are sometimes cruelly named) for the old values—all that ineffable beauty in Keats's odes, or that wonderfully funny stuff in *Pickwick Papers* and the fiction of Kingsley Amis.

A reader who comes to a review like this one hoping to encounter an effort at reconciliation of such different procedures will be disappointed, since my inclination is instead to stress and if possible broaden the difference between them, between us (or at least me) and them. This is a bad way to behave if you believe that pluralism ought to be the roomy, inclusive word for one's philosophy toward alien modes of approaching literature, or (sorry, Derrida) "writing." But life may be too short for long views, and there is enough that is irritating about deconstruction's (hereafter, usually, decon) way of going about things to justify a less than even-handed view. It may even be appropriate to speak up as a professional colleague of these critics and teachers who is, by careful standards, rather minimally educated in the literature of decon (Jonathan Culler's very useful bibliography put me to shame), yet knows there's a reason for my not "keeping up" in the way I keep up with the things I care most about. And perhaps it is acceptable too not to "understand" overmuch—while it is still going on—a way of behaving toward what Paul deMan would call "literary language" which seems to me, in its manner and idiom, not all that literary.

These surly attitudes were set in motion by two recent produc-

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tions of very productive, very literary people indeed.[1] Edward Said and Jonathan Culler are not only at the center of their profession, sought after at the many symposia on what's happening in criticism or "literary studies" at the moment, but are learned, gracious, resourceful literary men, wary of proselytizing, even of arguing too winningly or insistently for a cause. Mr. Said especially is a serious student of philosophy and of other languages (his political-polemical role re Islam is another of his hats) who also has a bit of enthusiasm for "appreciative" criticism even though he has to shake his finger at it for being socially irresponsible. He speaks at one point of "the harmless rhetoric of self-delighting humanism," which in its allusion to Yeats's characterization of his daughter's imagined self (in "A Prayer for my Daughter") should have made that "harmless" a bit less merely harmless in its effect. But, as can be seen from his earlier book *Beginnings*, Mr. Said has been, and for some time, deep into theory. The longest essay in the new collection ("Criticism Between Culture and System"), a consideration of Derrida and Foucault, observes that there is irony in the fact that these writers "are solicited nowadays for literary criticism." Said evidently doesn't find that irony as troublesome as I do, since having noted it he labors on to expound each critic's procedures without casting much of a cold eye on why such eager solicitation of their views should be engaged in by his and my colleagues in the field.

In his introduction, "Secular Criticism," Said attempts to give his collection unity by asserting that "literary theory" has turned its back on the world, on "life" and history. After making a pass (unsuccessful I think) at connecting this turnaway with the "ascendancy of Reaganism," he gives us his notion of the function of criticism, 1983:

> It is not practicing criticism either to validate the status quo or to join up with a priestly caste of acolytes and dogmatic metaphysicians. Each essay in this book affirms the connection between texts and the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies, and events.

Yet reading the essays without this affirmation, I don't think one would have felt it very strongly, since many of them—on matters like Repetition or Originality, on various contemporary theorists and the relations among them—seem to me to say little about the "actualities" of life or politics or society. Instead there are shrewd criticisms (in the Derrida-Foucault essay) of how selective Derrida is in the texts he chooses to write about. For an old-fashioned EngLit

[1]THE WORLD, THE TEXT, AND THE CRITIC, by *Edward W. Said*. Harvard University Press. $20.00. ON DECONSTRUCTION: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism, by *Jonathan Culler*. Cornell University Press. $22.50.

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student like yours truly, this has always been a problem, since it is Rousseau or Plato or Lévi-Strauss, rather than Byron or Milton or Trollope, whose work Derrida addresses. Mr. Said thinks that Derrida avoids texts in which there is too much narrative, unless that narrative is illustrative, representative of a point to which his "suspicious attention" can then be drawn. And he points out that in many novels, surely many modern ones (but earlier ones as well—Sterne, Cervantes, Proust, Conrad) "the very problematic of textuality is neither eluded nor elided, but made into an explicit intentional and constitutive aspect of the narrative." Thus, Said argues, these texts cannot be deconstructed, since the narrative is already engaged in the process of questioning, of playing with, itself. He says further, and I think rightly, that the attempt to show (in the now familiar, so weary language) how signifier and signified never coincide, or how the intention or putative meaning of a literary work will always be subverted by its figural language, by the working of the text itself—how this attempt works better with some texts than others. Of what use would a decon approach be to self-conscious tricksters like Barth or Pynchon who take the critic's work into their own narrative hands? Or why should a decon choose to engage the highly polished surface of a novel by Anthony Powell, or a play by Jonson or Bernard Shaw, in which, as Said points out, it is the "*novelist* writing" (or the dramatist) we care about and try to attend to?

The surface of Mr. Said's own writing is also highly polished, with some of the vices that phrase may imply. In his encyclopedic reading (philosophy, social and political theory, as well as in the literature of various cultures), in his easy concourse with many languages, and in his tendency to let the names fly thick and fast—never forgetting to "bring in" somebody at the drop of a hat—he reminds me of no one so much as Harry Levin. And reading some of these theoretical go-arounds reminded me of how I used to feel reading Levin—like a fly in marmalade:

> Even if we wish to contest Foucault's findings about the exclusions by classical European culture of what it constituted as insane or irrational, and even if we are not convinced that the culture's paradoxical encouragement and repression of sexuality has been as generalized as he believes, we cannot fail to be convinced that the dialectic of self-fortification and self-confirmation by which culture achieves its hegemony over society and the State is based on a constantly practiced differentiation of itself from what it believes to be not itself.
>
> "Secular Criticism"

I simply fail either to be convinced or not convinced by a sentence like this one which in fact could do with some higher polishing. And when I am told in another essay that

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> perhaps one way of imagining the critical issue of aesthetic genesis is to view the text as a dynamic field, rather than as a static block, of words. This field has a certain range or reference, a system of tentacles (which I have been calling affiliative) partly potential, partly actual: to the author, to the reader, to a historical situation, to other texts, to the past and present. In one sense no text is finished, since its potential range is always being extended by every additional reader.

—I want to tear out patches of my hair, throw the heavy book against the wall and utter an obscenity or two. Christ, didn't we know all of it *before*, back with T. S. Eliot, before Foucault and Derrida and all this bloody endless going-on about "texts"? If there is where Said comes out at the end of "Roads: Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism," then he certainly hasn't taken the one less traveled by.

By contrast, it is such a pleasure, so instructive, to read him on Jonathan Swift (two essays here) or on Conrad (one essay) or on writers and subjects unknown to me (an essay on Raymond Schwab; a fascinating one on "Islam, Philology and French Criticism") that one can only regret Mr. Said's too-extensive acquaintance with theory and theoreticians. One of the essays is titled "Traveling Theory" and Said has surely been a fellow traveler, even though as noted earlier he seems to be trying to climb out of the marmalade and get back in touch with "existential actualities," with life, politics, society, manners. I can only encourage him in this endeavour by suggesting, even if he chooses not to take up once more the book I understood him to be writing years ago about Swift, that there is Anthony Trollope or John Henry Newman to benefit from his consideration. Since he has paid in full his theoretical dues, why not head off on some road not quite so much traveled these days? It would make all the difference, and I don't mean in a Derridean sense.

The most ambitious part of Jonathan Culler's anatomy of decon theory and criticism is his exposition of Derrida's procedures, and rather than attempting to summarize and surely get wrong in the process Culler's clarifyings of what, in the master, feel like anything but (I am an unsuccessful reader of Derrida, you see), the following paragraph may suggest both the authority of Culler's writing and the sorts of things you must be involved with if you are to talk the language of decon:

> In seeing how the system of *s'entendre parler* serves as a model of presence and reveals the solidarity of phonocentrism, logocentrism, and metaphysics of presence, we have explored the reason why speech has been set above writing. This opposition, in all its strategic importance, is deconstructed in the texts that affirm it, as speech turns out to depend upon those very qualities that have

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> been predicated of writing. Theories grounded on presence—whether of meaning as a signifying intention present to consciousness at the moment of utterance or of an ideal norm that subsists behind all appearances—undo themselves, as the supposed foundation or ground proves to be the product of a differential system, or rather, of difference, differentiation, and deferral. But the operation of deconstruction or the self-deconstruction of logocentric theories does not lead to a new theory that sets everything straight.

There is about that last sentence a kind of congratulatory air, as if the world were full of naive non-decons like your reviewer, vainly hankering after some "new theory" which would really fix things up (as if a theory, in literary matters, ever fixed anything up). More than once, here and in other theorists, there comes the moment when they disabuse us of our supposedly avidly shared desire to yell Stop The Music, let's have some *presence*, give me a voice which speaks from the heart, sincerely, one in which I can repose my trust.

Perhaps there is something in what they say, and I confess, shamefully, to preferring a logocentric universe to the other sort (doubtless a hangover from my early years in the Episcopal church). Other bogeys such as phonocentrism I embrace each time I read a poem aloud to a class of students and we pretend, sometimes to our mutual satisfaction, that we are being addressed by John Dryden or Keats, even while decons murmur in the wings, observing sagely our befuddlement by a metaphysic of presence. But of all these bogeys the most morally heinous is, without a doubt, Phallocentrism, and Culler interestingly if somewhat surprisingly begins his book with a chapter called "Reading as a Woman" in which he singles out for praise various examples (from Kate Millett, Carolyn Heilbrun, Judith Fetterly and others) of feminist "resisting" readings which show up for what they are the phallic ones committed by various male critics. Culler appears to like all resisting readings equally well, and in his eagerness to approve the ways women-readers dismantle the naive structures erected by various gents, he is it seems to me rather uncritical. For example, Judith Fetterly's chapter (from *The Resisting Reader*) on *The Bostonians* is singled out for special commendation as an example of the "broad and comprehensive vision" of which feminist criticism is capable. Yet reading that chapter, I was struck by how tone-deaf Fetterly seemed to James's humor, to the narrative voice which so insistently and always playfully entertains itself and us. That anyone can discuss *The Bostonians* without treating its comedy as central seems unaccountable to me, though evidently not to Mr. Culler, concerned as he is with marshaling illustrative evidences that "reading as a woman" is very much going on.

On the question of tone-deafedness, if I were—heaven forbid—to

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accuse the decons of "privileging" anything, I would say that they care more about the mind than the ear, about conceptual rather than aural operations. (How good are they at listening to music? I've wondered. To capitalize on James Merrill's line, can they tell Bix from Buxtehude from Boulez?) They seem to derive their kicks from arguing rather than from listening—nobody would accuse them of cultivating the pleasure principle with respect to poetry. Culler refers to Barbara Johnson's statement that deconstruction is "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text," calling it "a happy phrase"; decons like to tease out those forces and tease themselves into a situation which can only be called (and they will so call it) "problematic." Here is Culler's concluding paragraph to his chapter, "Stories of Reading":

> Taken together, these stories of reading adumbrate the paradoxical situation in which deconstruction operates. While addressing meaning as a problem of reading, as a result of applying codes and conventions, these stories come to rely on the text as a source of insight, suggesting that one must grant some authority to the text so as to try to learn from it, even when what one learns about texts and readings puts in question the claim that anything in particular is definitively in the text. Deconstruction explores the problematic situation to which stories of reading have led us.

One tries to imagine the decon sitting down at his/her (they like to use the slash a lot) typewriter, trying to decide which literary work to fiddle with next. *The Confidence Man*? *Silas Marner*? *Don Juan*? (No, probably not *Don Juan*.) Would it be likely to yield the sort of "paradoxical situation" called for? Could it be trusted to land its investigator in troubled waters, into the theoretical soup which becomes more problematic the more it is stirred? Or would it, the spineless thing, prove too conducive to understanding in insufficiently labyrinthine ways? What if one ended up thinking that *Moby Dick* was really about going to sea in pursuit of a great white whale? Perhaps I delude myself in imagining that there is any work so lucid, so clear about itself as to be a candidate for rejection on the grounds of insufficiently problematical interest. *Moby Dick* will in fact serve them quite well; still, I await the deconstruction of *Volpone*, though not with bated breath.

As has been pointed out by other reviewers of *On Deconstruction*, Mr. Culler's own style of discourse and larger methodological aims are un-Derridean, insufficiently problematic to qualify for bona fide membership in the club, since as he says in his introduction, "This book attempts to dispel confusion, to furnish meanings and ends, by discussing what is at stake in today's critical debates . . . " No true decon would set out to do anything so banal as to "dispel con-

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fusion," surely. At one point Culler invokes Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger and Derrida as writers who are devoted to "sawing off the branch on which [they] are sitting," since "they suspect that if they fall there is no 'ground' to hit." As far as I can see, Mr. Culler engages in no comparable sawing; he knows where the ground is and just where he's sitting in relation to it. For inside the formidably thorough, patient, well-read person of Jonathan Culler beats an unproblematical heart of common sense. At one moment he seems truly uneasy, when he takes up the question of just what implications there are for literary study in the theoretical paths he has been so carefully tracing:

> Despite the manifest relevance to literary studies of the relation between reading and misreading, the implications of deconstruction for the study of literature are far from clear. . . . The implications of deconstruction for literary study must be inferred, but it is not clear how such inferences are to be made. . . . In particular, through its questioning of the philosophical oppositions on which critical thought has inevitably relied, deconstruction raises theoretical issues that critics must either ignore or pursue.

These interesting, provocative remarks provoked me to the following responses. First, if decon's implications for literary study aren't clear, still we can observe what has been happening to literary study. We can note, as John Bayley noted and as Paul deMan has announced, that true literary study is henceforth to be conducted by professionals. Let the amateurs fool around with book reviewing, or amuse themselves with appreciations of poems and novels, or pretend that it's important to make evaluative judgments among works. Harmless occupations, but don't confuse them with real literary study. Second, even though (as Culler says above) it is not clear how "inferences are to be made" concerning decon's implications for literary studies, the fact of this lack of clarity will be the spur for a hundred or so more professional essays and books about this new problem. Third, if critics "must either ignore or pursue" these theoretical issues, it might be worthwhile to make the case for ignoring them.

Is that a foolish, an anti-intellectual thing to suggest? Culler quotes Richard Rorty who (in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*) cites the appeal of literary theory to younger people as a "source for youth's self-description of its own difference from the past."[2] Well and good perhaps, but does it follow that those of us no longer young should be obliged to swing with these interests? Or to

[2]In *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, $25.00), Elizabeth Bruss has many interesting things to say about the rise of Theory.

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espouse a soppy pluralism and "respect" an activity we wouldn't be caught dead practicing? I think rather that noncooperation is the proper response to decon. If they keep insisting how *hard* reading is—virtually impossible, Harold Bloom has declared—then it is time to emphasize the ease, the grace, the pleasure of reading. All one needs is an active mind, a good chair and a lot of time to sit in it: now get at those Trollopes you've been meaning to get at for years! Further suggestions: if possible never refer to a "text," but use the word "book" (or poem or novel or play) without apology. If somebody tells you that you really can't talk about an "author," just say, why of course I can, and proceed to. Do not argue the point, but be prepared to speak boldly of what, as you see it, Frost or Stevens was "getting at" in this or that poem, and maintain that a good poem is one in which that intention, that meaning, is vibrantly, originally, beautifully stated. Eschew the word "problematic" (almost as much as "problematics"), as well as "valorize," "recuperate," "binary opposition," "slippage" (except when talking about hydraulics or trouble on the ice) and all words ending with "centric" (logo, phono, and phallo). These are but the merest of beginning hints for behavior; many more will occur to you as you deal vigorously with decon and with particular decons.

Finally, and more gravely: do not speak of English studies as if it were a phenomenon of the past merely. Mr. Said does this when he praises Lionel Trilling, W. A. Wimsatt, and Reuben Brower as "deeply intelligent and humane" students and teachers of "English," but speaks about them as a historical phenomenon long gone. Correct this by looking around amongst the living and making up a list of ten American or English critics who are contemporary exhibits of the qualities Said praises, and who operate without benefit of theory, are estimable non-decons. My list runs, compiled without undue thought, Hugh Kenner, Robert M. Adams, Irving Howe, Christopher Ricks, John Carey, John Bayley, Helen Vendler, John Hollander, R. W. Flint, Paul Fussell. As F. R. Leavis used to say, the list could be extended. And for all my own reservations about Leavis' work, my attempts over the years to escape from his clutches, I stand with him in being not only willing, but eager, to "privilege" "English," and to invite students, nay even incite them, to privilege it also. Doing this well is, as most readers of this piece well know, a full-time, full-life activity. If one is lucky and keeps busy, the teaching and the poems will seem real, even (again in John Bayley's words) "while rigorous and exciting new modes of making them unreal are being cooked up by the professionals elsewhere."

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GEORGE KEARNS

# World Well Lost

THIS IS A GAME FOR AN IDLE HOUR, but an instructive one: how often, I wonder, if I'd been an early reader of works now classics, would I have seen them for what they are, or have imagined what time would come to make of them? Unless I'd been part of the lucky avant-garde that surrounded and protected it, would I have decided, with Virginia Woolf, that *Ulysses,* for all its experimental importance, was "a memorable catastrophe—immense in daring, terrific in disaster"? Or, like Gide, have declined the opportunity to publish Proust? How long would my patience have lasted for *Moby-Dick* or *Mauberley* or *Watt*? How many mediocrities would I have supported? Still, caution must not prevent enthusiasm, nor muster respect for the merely worthy, in which there is much to admire, but no strangeness, no magic. At least three of the books here under review seem to me of permanent interest—if you understand permanent as "a very long time." Two of them are by authors who have global reputations that guarantee vast readerships, Norman Mailer and Gabriel García Márquez. The third, the one that seems to me immediately to belong to "world literature," as if it had always been there, may easily be overlooked by English-speaking readers, in part because it is not subject to the publicity of a Mailer or Márquez, in part because it is so strange and quiet, so tangential to Western traditions. Our world, as we read Kikuo Itaya's *Tengu Child*—and Mailer's *Ancient Evenings,* as well—becomes a world well lost.

We owe the publication of *Tengu Child* to the late John Gardner, who has introduced the volume and has participated in the translation with Nobuko Tsukui.[1] These sixteen tales transport us, enchant us, to Kyoto and the countryside around it in the latter half of the twelfth century, an era of epic struggle for control of Empire between the Minimoto family and the Taira family, and of the early years of the first shogunate, established in 1192 by the triumphant Minimoto Yoritomo. Each of the stories is differentiated from the others in tone and in shaping, yet none of them taken alone, say for an anthology, could retain the richness and echoes it gathers from the presence of the others. The stories move in unexpected directions, so that reading *Tengu Child* is like walking a gently winding

[1] TENGU CHILD, by *Kikuo Itaya.* Trans. by *John Gardner* and *Nobuko Tsukui.* Introduction by *John Gardner.* Southern Illinois University Press. np

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path we have never been down before. To a Western reader, at least, the very strangeness of the narrative movement becomes a source of great charm; its surprising turns seem dictated less by conventions of story-telling than by the extraordinary sensitivity of the characters and by the enlightened Buddhist eye of the story-teller. Itaya was born in 1898, attained a degree of Buddhist detachment in his youth (we are told that he refused to kill the roaches in his house), and lived quietly as a schoolteacher. No information is given about when these stories were written, but they appear to have remained unpublished until about ten years ago. They are rooted in traditional Japanese literature, in *The Tale of Genji* and in ancient folk tales and legends, yet they avoid any false-naive reproduction of traditional forms. Itaya's image of his own spirit neatly suggests his combination of modernity and Buddhist timelessness: he wished to live, he says, "in a state of mind which allowed me to float over and around the world of good and evil like an airplane flying low but not so low as to get lost."

Medieval Kyoto and the landscape that stretches beyond it arise before our eyes as wonderfully as the Japanese world of "flowers or houses or people, solid and recognisable" that arises from the little pieces of paper in a porcelain bowl of water on the last page of Proust's *Overture*. Yet Itaya's is no willowware world, but a remarkably solid and bustling one, peopled by criminals, police, lords, peasants, soldiers, ghosts, priests, monks and their savage "monk soldiers," merchants, shopkeepers, and the strong-willed women who are their wives and lovers. Ignorant armies clash by night, as savage civil wars rage on, burning villages and temples. Benevolence appears in the form of hidden sympathies and correspondences. Salvation arrives as the unexpected consequence of small moments of individual displacement from routines of passion and self-concern. In "The Robber and the Flute" a super-thief returns night after night to a house he intends to rob, enchanted by the sound of a flute played by the owner. One night he follows the flute-player to the bank of a river where the musician has come to attune his music to the sounds of the water. When the thief loses his footing and falls in the river, the splash gives the musician just the inspiration he needs. He rescues the thief and reveals that he has known the thief has been stalking him and staking out his house. His reaction is less one of magnanimity than of an inspired recognition of some hidden affinity. "The way of stealing and the way of music may have something in common," he says, and the thief becomes his disciple. In the title story, "Tengu Child" (bird-creature child), a mysterious stone appears on the doorstep of a poor family. A passing priest decides that the stone is a sacred stone with healing powers. The lives of the family and of the whole neighborhood are transformed, as a shrine is erected for the stone and the family rises to a priestly status. The *tengu* child, from his

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perch in the top of a persimmon tree, observes everything, guiltily aware that the stone has not fallen from heaven, but is an ordinary roof-stone that he had playfully placed on the doorstep. When he reveals his secret, the life of the neighborhood returns to normal. Here, its little plot brought to a conclusion, we expect the story to end, but Itaya continues it, moving in a new direction. Suddenly war and invasion by "wild monk soldiers" threaten the people of this Kyoto neighborhood. "The child's mind, however, was swinging and swaying in a complex thought." Privileged to have observed, in the affair of the sacred stone, the follies, ambitions and illusions of the world, he has arrived, without knowing what it is, at a Buddhist detachment that makes the tangles of human passions, the bloody struggles of the Taira and Minomoto families for control of Empire, appear "empty, ridiculous, and shameful." The little incidents upon which Itaya elaborates his stories are simple: his art is in the solidity with which he presents medieval Kyoto as a figure of the world of entangled good and evil, and in the lightness of brush stroke with which he renders landscapes and states of enlightened awareness. I found great pleasure in this fictional world glowing with Itaya's delicate Buddhist sensibility.

Fumiko Enchi, "generally regarded by the Japanese," says her publisher, "as their most important woman writer," belongs to the generation of Itaya. *Masks*,[2] published in 1958, is an intense short novel set about a decade after the war. Enchi's characters are secularized, partly-Westernized intellectuals who maintain an antiquarian interest in traditional Japanese culture and amuse themselves by studying spirit-possession at a Madame Sosostris level of table-rapping. (The medium at a séance speaks in French.) In fact, their interest in spirit-possession and Nō masks is fairly unconvincing: they seem obliged to pursue their interests so that material will be at hand for the author's cloudy, ominous symbolism. *Masks* is faintly interesting for its glimpses of Japanese life in a post-MacArthur era of ball-point pens, Old Parr scotch, and private detectives who spy on adulterous husbands. The central character is Meiko, a respected poet and editor of a poetry journal, the most unpleasant literary Mother since *The Little Foxes*. Wronged by her husband in her youth, Meiko takes revenge on men with patience and precision, dominating her widowed daughter-in-law, Yasuko, and manipulating the two men who are in love with Yasuko, a professor of literature and a doctor-psychologist. Using Yasuko as bait for her trap, Meiko tricks one of the lovers into impregnating her retarded adult daughter in order to realize a twisted vision of matriarchy triumphant. It would be difficult to find two works by writers of the same generation and culture that present as strong a contrast as Enchi's *Masks* and Itaya's *Tengu Child*. Itaya's book has more evil in it than

[2] MASKS, by *Fumiko Enchi*. Trans. by *Juliet Winters Carpenter*. Knopf. $11.95.

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does *Masks,* but as a work of art it is bright. *Masks* is just an unpleasant *book.* On its final page, Yasuko, caught in "helpless bewilderment," wonders that "the vast, mysterious depths within Meiko that had always so fascinated her seemed suddenly to become bottomless." And bottomless was my fascination with *Masks*—fascination with the spectacle of a gifted writer setting out determinedly to create so fetid a story.

Gabriel García Márquez' *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*[3] is a loving reconstruction of lost time in the Colombian village, the "mislaid town" of his youth, the town that became the Macondo of *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* Here, Márquez abandons the famous magic realism of *One Hundred Years,* in which jugglers had six arms, it could rain for eleven years straight, people fed Persian carpets to their animals, and legendary voyagers had been around the world sixty-five times. Yet the town, now seen/remembered/reconstructed a quarter of a century after the ritualized murder around which the narrative circles, is still a place of wonder, a backwater of time within which the presence of electricity, the telegraph and a Model T Ford seems anachronistic. The actual is transformed into the marvelous as Márquez appears to keep asking himself, "Can there have been such a place?" and answering, "There was." Here, for example, the whole town has prepared, over-prepared as it turns out, for the arrival of a bishop:

> Plácida Linero was right: the bishop didn't get off his boat. There were a lot of people at the dock in addition to the authorities and the schoolchildren, and everywhere one could see the crates of well-fattened roosters they were bearing as a gift for the bishop, because cockscomb soup was his favorite dish. At the pier there was so much firewood piled up that it would have taken at least two hours to load. But the boat didn't stop. It appeared at the bend in the river, snorting like a dragon, and then the band of musicians started to play the bishop's anthem, and the cocks began to crow in their baskets and aroused all the other roosters in town.
>
> In those days the legendary paddle-wheelers that burned wood were on the point of disappearing, and the few that remained in service no longer had player pianos or bridal staterooms and were barely able to navigate against the current. But this one was new, and it had two smokestacks instead of one, with the flag painted on them like armbands, and the wheel made of planks at the stern gave it the drive of a seagoing ship. On the upper deck, beside the captain's cabin, was the bishop in his white cassock and with his retinue of Spaniards. "It was Christmas weather," my sister Margot said. What happened, according to her, was that the

[3] CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD, by *Gabriel García Márquez.* Trans. by *Gregory Rabassa.* Knopf. $10.95.

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boat whistle let off a shower of compressed steam as it passed by the docks, and it soaked those who were closest to the edge. It was a fleeting illusion: the bishop began to make the sign of the cross in the air opposite the crowd on the pier, and he kept on doing it mechanically afterwards, without malice or inspiration, until the boat was lost from view and all that remained was the uproar of the roosters.

The narration, like a hundred film-clips taken at different times and through the lenses of memories more or less clear or obscure, pieces together a night and a morning on which the twins, Pedro and Pablo Vicario, are reluctantly obliged by an unquestioned code in which "affairs of honor are sacred monopolies," to murder on his doorstep their friend, a young rancher, Santiago Nasar. The evening before, their sister, Angela, had been married to a wealthy, swashbuckling stranger, Bayardo San Román, who had "arrived on the weekly boat with some saddlebags decorated with silver that matched the buckles of his belt and the rings on his boots," with "the waist of a novice bullfighter, golden eyes, and a skin slowly roasted by saltpeter. He arrived wearing a short jacket and very tight trousers, both of natural calfskin, and kid gloves of the same color." On the wedding night Bayardo discovers that Angela is not a virgin, and he returns her to her parents' house, with a dazzling mixture of brutality and courtesy. When she names Santiago Nasar as the "perpetrator," her brothers—who go to great lengths to have someone in the town stop them—undertake the slaughter everyone except Santiago Nasar knows will take place. For the townspeople, as for the courts, "there was only one victim: Bayardo San Román. They took it for granted that the other actors in the tragedy had been fulfilling with dignity, and even with a certain grandeur, their part in the destiny that life had assigned them."

Márquez and his family are characters in the story. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is both the slow-motion reconstruction of the fateful morning, remembered from a hundred points of view, and the story of the author's own obsession, two decades later, "when I returned to this forgotten village, trying to put the broken mirror of memory back together from so many scattered shards." He interviews everyone still alive, the bride, the bridegroom, one of the murderers, and all the people who either refused or neglected to prevent the killing. Márquez' theme is in the line of Hawthorne, Melville and Faulkner: fiction exploring, through hazes of language, legend and fading memory, the limits of knowing what "really" happened. The trail leads Márquez through confused texts, old letters, fragments of an extraordinary magistrate's report found years later in the Palace of Justice in the provincial capital:

There was no classification of files whatever, and more than a

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> century of cases were piled up on the floor of the decrepit colonial building that had been Sir Francis Drake's headquarters for two days. The ground floor would be flooded by high tides and the unbound volumes floated about the deserted offices. I searched many times with the water up to my ankles in that lagoon of lost causes, and after five years rummaging around only chance let me rescue some 322 pages filched from the more than 500 that the brief must have contained.

Márquez brings his fugue-like narration to a surprising, moving conclusion, as the aging bride and bridegroom, who have never lost their first passion for each other, are reunited, as if exhausted by the bankruptcy of the code that separated them. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is a short work, rich with a nostalgia untouched by sentimentality, shaped by a master who writes with ease and daring.

It would be hard to find a more sophisticated entertainment than Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose.*[4] The emphasis should fall evenly on both terms, *sophistication/entertainment*, for that very evenness is the point of Eco's enterprise. Entertainment proceeds from observing this most learned of semioticians on holiday, as one moment he appears to be in earnest, the next in play, until we reach a point at which any "interpretation" can only make us wonder if we've fallen into the trap of our pretensions. Sophistication proceeds by leading out of its own labyrinthine paradoxes, by way of a secret door as obvious as a purloined letter, so that the most deconstructed of readers finds himself *malgré lui* in the most old-fashioned of readerly positions, plunk down in an entertaining detective-story *cum* historical novel. In his collection of critical essays, *The Role of the Reader*, Eco remarks that with *Oedipus Rex* "one can decide that the basic 'stuff' one is interested in is the traditional story that the plot reveals step by step through the various phases of the detection. Therefore *Oedipus Rex* has a first-level story (detection) and a second-level one." The first level in *The Name of the Rose* is clear: the closed form of the British detective story, here set in a Benedictine abbey in 1327, accompanied by the trappings of the classic historical reconstruction in the manner of *Romola*. What is the second level, then? A brilliant dramatization of the position that we are the languages and codes we manipulate, when we are not manipulated by them? Or Umberto Eco, appearing and disappearing like the Cheshire Cat? Another way to put it is to ask if Eco, who has philosophized at length on the paradoxes of "open" and "closed" texts, has not made it his game to produce the scorned closed text that may covertly be an open one after all. Or the other way round.

[4] THE NAME OF THE ROSE, by *Umberto Eco*. Trans. by *William Weaver*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $15.95.

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The Sherlock Holmes figure in Eco's mystery is an elder English Franciscan, William of Baskerville (where Conan Doyle's hound would howl centuries later), an ex-Inquisitor and disciple of Roger Bacon. His Watson is a Benedictine novice, Adso of Melk, who, wide-eyed at his master's wisdom, learning, and powers of deduction, accompanies William to a Benedictine monastery in Northern Italy on a high-level mission of ecclesiastical-political diplomacy. But first there is a murder to solve—a young monk has been thrown from a tower window—then another, and another. William of Baskerville, in whom Reason dominates Faith, sets out to solve the crimes, racing against time to find the killer-Benedictine before the evil Pope John's intellectual goon-squad arrives . . . as all trails lead toward the abbey library, the most extraordinary library ever imagined, a great *tour de force.* Early in the novel the abbot warns William about that library, which is both a building and a state of mind: "The library defends itself, immeasurable as the truth it houses, deceitful as the falsehood it preserves. A spiritual labyrinth, it is also a terrestrial labyrinth. You might enter and you might not emerge." Ah, here in spades is the Foreshadowing that was so important, so unconvincing, in our high school English classes! But there's no point in telling the story of a detective story except in a detective story.

The chronicle comes to us in the form of a manuscript, which may never have existed, or which may have been intertextualized out of recognition, written in his old age by Adso of Melk, and now re-presented by Umberto Eco as "an Italian version of an obscure, neo-Gothic French version of a seventeenth-century Latin edition of a work written in Latin by a German monk." (Re-interpreted yet again in William Weaver's splendid English translation.) Adso's memory is as encyclopedic as Eco's formidable learning, and we are provided with lengthy debates and disquisitions on scholastic philosophy and medieval political issues which turn out to be remarkably (endlessly?) modern, except for the appeals to the powers of God by which the churchmen defend and expediently extricate themselves from every doctrinal dispute. The ancient text is littered, comically, with the debris of late-twentieth-century critical debate, as we hear of "signs of signs," hovering over "the very abyss that the abyss invokes"; of such remarkable discoveries as the fact that a speaker may not be so much inventing his own sentences "as using the disiecta membra of other sentences, heard some time in the past," and that "to know what one book says you must read others." We have the obligatory bow to the self-reflexive text:

> I seemed to hear (or did I really hear?) that voice and I saw those visions that had accompanied my youth as a novice, my first reading of the sacred books, and my nights of meditation in the choir of Melk, and in the delirium of my weak and weakened

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> senses I heard a voice mighty as a trumpet that said, "Write in a book what you now see" (and this is what I am doing) . . .

Is it Eco's ultimate joke that the obvious, much labored over, has always been known? The more things change the more they remain the same: "Whence it is clear that in Paris, too, there was a confusion of ideas or someone who wished to confuse them for his own purposes." The fourteenth century of *The Name of the Rose* is remarkably similar to the 1980s in its combined intellectual and political excitement, violence, oppression and futility. Something of the comic balance of Eco's bravura performance is suggested by his straight-faced prefatory statement:

> I transcribe my text with no concern for timeliness. In the years when I discovered [Adso's chronicle], there was a widespread conviction that one should write only out of a commitment to the present, in order to change the world. Now, after ten years or more, the man of letters (restored to his loftiest dignity) can happily write out of pure love of writing. And so I now feel free to tell, for sheer narrative pleasure, the story of Adso of Melk, and I am comforted and consoled in finding it immeasurably remote in time . . . gloriously lacking in any relevance for our day, atemporally alien to our hopes and our certainties.

In *Ararat*,[5] D. M. Thomas, author of *The White Hotel*, attempts a balancing act somewhat like Umberto Eco's: on the one hand the book is loaded with Significance; on the other it's all Fiction Games receding in an infinite series. This creates an annoyingly schizophrenic effect in which the serious is undercut by the clever, and the clever made heavy by the portentous. It's a puzzling book, partly because it's made out of puzzles, partly because after two readings I'm still not sure exactly who's who or what's going on. On the game side of Thomas' brain the book is an improvisation on the word *improvisation*, or an M. C. Escher drawing of a hand that's drawing a hand that draws the hand that is drawing it, and so on. Many find this endlessly fascinating. Others find that once you've got the Concept there's no place much to go. Anyway: Once upon a time the Polish poet, Mickiewicz, a famous *improvisatore*, gave a performance that captured the imagination of Pushkin, who in turn began to write a tale about an *improvisatore*, called *Egyptian Nights*. Pushkin left the tale unfinished, breaking off in the middle of a long poem his *improvisatore* is spouting about Cleopatra. A century and a half later, a clever, disenchanted Soviet poet, Victor Surkov, who has paid his dues to the Cultural Commissars by writing politically acceptable Soviet potboilers, and who has had to develop con-

[5] ARARAT, by *D. M. Thomas*. Viking. $13.50.

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siderable skills as an improvisor in order to keep afloat in Moscow, finds himself completing—in a style perfectly matched to Pushkin's—Pushkin's story. Moreover, he sometimes seems to imagine he is Pushkin, or at least play at being Pushkin (as well as Pasternak). As Surkov improvises the completion of *Egyptian Nights,* Pushkin suddenly turns up in what began as his own story, only to be killed in the famous duel with the Baron Georges D'Anthès. Alarmed by this ending, Surkov rejects it and makes up another. All this while he's been traveling to America by ship, but somehow he arrives in New York by plane. (Was he imagining or making up a story about the whole shipboard part of the novel?) In New York he is involved with an Armenian-American woman admirer, but striking out with her sexually, he begins to fantasize a trip to Mexico with a sexy American journalist who takes down in shorthand another of his improvisations—this time supposedly the first "honest" thing he's written in years. Shortly thereafter, another clever, disenchanted Soviet poet-liar-improvisor-survivor, Sergei Rozanov, finds himself stuck in a Gorky hotel room with a blind woman who's writing a dissertation on him. He has come only to have a sexual holiday, but she turns out to be unattractive, and the sex doesn't turn out at all, so he sits up all night improvising a story on the theme she sets for him—*improvisation.* And the story he tells is about a poet named Surkov, who is completing Pushkin's *Egyptian Nights* and who travels to New York, where he becomes involved with an Armenian woman, and so on, and so on. Moreover—I know this is exhausting—there's a coda about *another* Armenian-American woman who visits Armenia in company with *another* Soviet poet, who is a brilliant improvisor, and whose improvisations just may contain the whole story of Rozanov-Surkov-Pushkin, even though Rozanov appears to be telling *that* story. So we have the clever possibility that the center may be the periphery at the same time that the periphery is the center! That's the Game side (much simplified). Then there's the Portentous side, a litany of the atrocities, genocide, massacres that have written themselves on the pages of our century: much about the Turkish slaughter of the Armenians in 1915, the Gulag, Babi Yar, Indo-China, Dachau, Treblinka, Charles Manson, Beria, and others. And there's a lot of sex, extremely coarsely presented, most of it of the numbed or bored variety. Sex, of course, is linked with violence. What are we to make of all this? That we live in a world that is horror in public, waste land in private, and that all that is left to do is improvise stories? I don't know. Surely Thomas is a clever and learned writer, at his best when he's performing acts of mimicry, and he can be a very funny mimic, one with perfect pitch. The high point of the book, for me, is a hilarious transcript of a press conference that Surkov gives at Kennedy Airport, trying to be terribly apolitical, American and "with it." Certainly there are other brilliantly sardonic touches. The publisher finds *Ararat* a "brutally fun-

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ny" book. Brutal, yes; funny, not often enough. Imagine Nabokov, coming toward you with Messages, wringing his hands over atrocities, sweating ever so slightly from the exertion required to perform his admittedly clever stunts.

Most of the ten short stories by Julio Cortázar collected in *We Love Glenda So Much*[6] are constructed on the same vertiginous, M. C. Escher, Moebius Strip principles as is *Ararat* (one of them is called "Moebius Strip"). "So many things begin and perhaps end as a game," starts one called "Graffiti," and Cortázar's tales are filled with the familiar game-playing signs that signify "postmodern": if we are to have something that looks like a story we must pay the cost of being self-consciously reminded that fiction is about fiction, writing about writing, and all that. So Cortázar's tales are marked by passages like this:

> Everything became future, something like the pages remaining in that novel left face down on a sofa, something already written and which it wasn't even necessary to read because it had already happened before being read, had already happened before happening in the reading.

This is getting to sound old hat, but it's only minimally annoying, for Cortázar's stories are generally short and light, even when they deal with serious subjects such as political oppression in his native Argentina. He likes to play tricks with time, space reality, illusion. For example, in "Stories I Tell Myself" a narrator makes up stories in which he imagines himself a truck driver named Oscar, who picks up a hitch-hiker named Dilia, a woman the narrator knows in "real" life. In the stories he makes up, Dilia doesn't recognize him, but the "real" Dilia goes on a trip, and returns with her own "real" story about being picked up by a truck driver—the same story the narrator has been telling himself. In "Press Clippings" a woman writer stumbles upon a scene in which a husband is brutally torturing his wife. The writer and the wife turn on the brute, torture him and kill him. Shortly thereafter, the writer comes upon a press clipping in which she reads about the very event she participated in, except that it took place in another city. When she returns to the "real" scene, it's no longer there. Behind their modish trappings and tricky narrative styles, Cortázar's stories are really nice old-fashioned "surprise ending" magazine tales in the tradition of Maupassant, O. Henry, Somerset Maugham, and "The Lady or the Tiger?" Seen that way, they have a certain antique charm and inconsequence. Back in the old days, when short story writers made real money, Cortázar could have done very nicely in *Colliers* or *The Sat-*

[6] WE LOVE GLENDA SO MUCH, by *Julio Cortázar*. Trans. by *Gregory Rabassa*. Knopf. $11.95.

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*urday Evening Post.* The title story, about an international conspiracy of narrowly-specialized film fans, is based on some tricky work with film, and could make an amusing movie, just as an earlier story by Cortázar was blown up into *Blow Up.*

Although they are not distinct, and it's easy to mistake one for the other, there are two kinds of storytellers. One says, "Let me display my skills of language, my powers of invention." The other says, "If I don't tell this story, no one will remember it, no one will know how it was." Danny Santiago is of the second kind, and will be read more for his subject, life among Mexican-Americans, than for his art, although he's an artist with a very sure touch. You'd have to be a dedicated highbrow (in the sense of "dedicated wordprocessor," it can't do anything else) not to catch the pleasure Santiago takes in his writing and the energy he brings to every page of his first novel, *Famous All Over Town.*[7] Fiction could not be less pretentious, nor more confident in its mimetic power: there's an amazing world out there, and words can do a lot to capture it. The center of Santiago's world is Shamrock Street—it used to be Irish—in a Mexican neighborhood in Los Angeles about twenty years ago. The old street has now been bulldozed down and asphalted over, and his narrator, who was known to people like teachers and probation officers as Rudy M. Medina, Jr., to everyone else as Chato, has returned, "slow, law-abiding and drunk," to the place where his "skinny little house" used to stand, with a "famous '55 low-mileage Buick" in front of it. He then turns the narration over to himself at the age of fourteen, and Danny Santiago's triumph is in the language he finds for the teenage Chato. The language carries the book, for I suppose that without it all that would be left would be sociology. There's a good deal of sociological observation, of course, but the verve of Chato's language leaves the Social Sciences far behind. It's a language that moves rapidly from one emotion to another, as Santiago renders it without much dialect, just light, expressive indications of the kind of syntax and Spanglish that are used in Chato's world. Every teacher has known Chatos: bright, curious, verbal, ambitious, cute, and hard to keep in school. His gang is Los Jesters de Shamrock, their enemies the rougher Sierra ("Mexicans, but very low, pure drogadictos"). There's trouble on the streets, trouble in school, and trouble at home. Chato wants to get it all in, what it was like before the neighborhood and the family broke up: his strong, oppressed little mother, who drags the family on a wonderfully observed trip back to her village in Mexico, from whose culture and language these urban Mexican-Americans are now as distant as they are from those of mainstream Los Angeles; his father with his "famous air-condition T-shirt," whose machismo doesn't work outside the culture that designed it; his sister, Lena, and her romance

[7] FAMOUS ALL OVER TOWN, by *Danny Santiago.* Simon and Schuster. $14.95.

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with a slick Mexican from "the other side." A lot happened in Chato's fourteenth year, including the way he made himself famous all over town, by writing:

> I hate to brag but that was the finest writing I ever did in all my life, a 4-color job with letters 2 feet high outlined in gold. Under the street lamp my name sparkled out into the night like a jewelry store. I stood to one side and watched The Public as they passed by inspecting it. With some, I couldn't guess their feelings but with others I rang bells. There was one older man, very well-dressed, the All-American type. When he saw my name it was like a gun aimed right at him. He nearly put up his hands.
>
> "Who is this Chato?" that man no doubt asked himself. "And what's his name doing on my Bank of America?"
>
> Possibly he was their vice-president. Anyway he bought a newspaper from the coin box then drove off in his Lincoln Continental. My name will follow that man home like the toothache. It will haunt his sleep and tomorrow it will still be scrambling inside his head. And he won't be my only victim.

*Famous All Over Town* is structured as a series of short, rich, adroitly-shaped sketches. Danny Santiago's warmth and affection for a resilient, deracinated people he knows very well makes this, for all the trouble it records, a very sweet book.

By this time, anyone who's at all likely to read Norman Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*[8] knows something of what it's "about": Egypt from the reign of Ramses the Second to that of Ramses the Ninth, two centuries later, a period of declining empire; that the outsized main character, Menehetet I, is 180 years old, having lived four lifetimes, for three of which he fathered himself by means of extraordinary sexual concentration, a feat available only to someone who could believe what Menehetet declares he believes; that he recounts his lifetimes as charioteer, general, merchant, priest, and sexual giver and receiver of all things, in the course of what Mailer has called the longest dinner-party conversation on record; and that the characters in the novel have, in varying degrees, the power to enter each other's thoughts, and often to speak through each other's voices. Even to tell that much about it may begin to make it sound silly, which I don't want to do. The plot of almost any great work can sound ridiculous, so I'll say no more than that *Ancient Evenings* has an extraordinary, intricate plot, one that shows Mailer as a master of narrative design, but you will hardly see that design at all until you arrive—and the problem is, will you arrive?—at the final pages. For it's clear that Mailer's book is a problem—I'd say a great problem of reader response. How can a book I read with such

[8] ANCIENT EVENINGS, by *Norman Mailer*. Little, Brown. $19.95.

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amazement and delight be so snittily dismissed by so many who have not read it—and, of course, by some who have? Some acute readers of my acquaintance have said some truly zany things, like "Who wants to read about Egypt?" or "Mailer ought to write about contemporary America." Well, literature wouldn't get far if it had to meet demands like that. Walter Clemons, an excellent critic, praised the book highly in *Vanity Fair*, but felt it necessary to distance himself from his own enthusiasm by adopting a running jokey tone, as if he knew in advance that he'd be hearing all over Vanity Fair, "You had to be kidding!" As I'm sure he has. With one hand, Harold Bloom, in the *New York Review of Books*, lavished hyperbolic praise upon it, then with the other took away as much as he had given. Mailer's *Pierre*, he called it. I'd say Mailer's *Moby-Dick*, but let me be quick to explain, because I've already had abuse heaped upon me for that.

I don't mean that *Ancient Evenings* is as "great" as *Moby-Dick*, which could only be cant even if I thought it. I mean, as I suggested at the beginning of this piece, that the problems we have in facing Mailer's book—to read or not to read, to finish or not to finish, to surrender or not to surrender, in Eliot's phrase, to the possibility of "the bewildering minute"—are much the same as those we would have had in 1851, facing Melville's long (and long is distinctly one of the problems), unruly, unexpected, vastly and strangely ambitious tale. If *Ancient Evenings* were shorter, people would still find difficulties for it, but they would be somewhat different. To enjoy *Ancient Evenings* you must give yourself to it completely, let it take whatever time and space it fills. Otherwise, by all means, don't bother. Mailer has planted within the text more than adequate signs that he knows exactly what he's doing, that he's written a very long book, one that is "unreadable," if you don't want to read it or if it loses its gamble. At one point Menehetet's granddaughter, "clapped her hands with pleasure when told that my great-grandfather had agreed to speak of his deeds in the service of Ramses the Second, although I do not believe she would have welcomed this if she knew how long the account might take." When Menehetet warns the current Pharaoh, Ramses the Ninth, who hopes to gather wisdom and power by hearing about his great ancestor, "To tell You might take every moment that is left in this night," that Royal Divinity replies, "I am awake until morning."

Of course it's not just length that produces the scruples. Mailer has done something people must sense as transgression, and I don't claim to know what it is. I suspect it has to do—after all the fun, sex, violence and splendor—with an irreducible demand that we take all this seriously. There's no way *Ancient Evenings* can be turned into allegory, metaphor, or game—as critics are already beginning to salvage from seriousness James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*. What is Mailer serious about? Among other things, a

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great spiritual ambition, a Yeatsian expansion of the self: the book takes as epigraph a passage from Yeats's prose, one that balances, as Yeats always does, inscrutably, playfully, between belief and skepticism. Mailer is serious, too, about using "Egypt" as a space for an imaginative penetration of what philosophers call "alternate conceptual frameworks." As Richard Rorty says, in a tightly-argued piece on the subject, "It occurs to us, as it did to Hegel, that those all-important a priori concepts, those which determine what our experience or our morals will be, might have been different. We cannot, of course, imagine what an experience or a practice *that* different would be like, but we can abstractly suggest that the men of the Golden Age, or the inhabitants of the Fortunate Isles, or the mad, might shape the intuitions that are our common property in different molds, and might thus be conscious of a different 'world.' "[9] Mailer's book is not a historical novel, nor a thinly-transformed version of any world we live in, but a profound imaginative effort to explore another "world" altogether. When that world vanishes, at the end of the book, we feel it as a sublime and awesome loss.

Much of what I want to say about *Ancient Evenings* was said by Governor-General Warren Hastings, in 1784, as he presented to the English-speaking world a translation he had commissioned of another strange text, the *Bhagavad Gita*:

> I would exact from every reader the allowance of obscurity, absurdity, barbarous habits, and a perverted morality. Where the reverse appears, I would have him receive it (to use a familiar phrase) as so much clear gain, and allow it a merit proportioned to the disappointment of a different expectation.
>
> In effect, without bespeaking this kind of indulgence, I could hardly venture to persist in my recommendation of this production for public notice.
>
> Many passages will be found obscure, many will seem redundant; others will be found cloathed with ornaments of fancy unsuited to our taste, and some elevated to a track of sublimity into which our habits of judgment will find it difficult to pursue them.

The first section of *Ancient Evenings* must be one of the finest passages of prose written in this century. The second section I found the only rough going, a long eccentric cosmogony-mythology, but it's essential to the book, and Mailer is determined to take no shortcut. After that, I found the writing beautifully sustained, ready to inform each paragraph with an excess of detail radiating from an engaged imagination. This is more than skillful or masterful writing. Mailer transcends himself, as Kipling did in *Kim*, with the help of some *duende* that remains with him to the end.

[9] "World Well Lost," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

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GEORGE CORE

# No Safe Harbor

THE HISTORY OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S LIFE is more arresting than the narrative line in any of her fictions. The Young Woman from the Provinces (east Texas) decides to write her way out of poverty and ignorance, and along the way she reinvents herself, creating a family past that is not only romantic, engaging and sentimental, but also usable for her purposes as the stuff of fiction. The life described in the sequence entitled *The Old Order* slowly replaces the life (partly described in "Noon Wine") that Callie Russell Porter led as a child when she endured a numbingly hard poverty of material circumstance, a poverty that should have led to a privation of spirit and of imagination. Fortunately or not, Porter's imagination always surmounted adversity, and even though she often stumbled and fell by the wayside, she continued on the upward path right up to the stunning success that *Ship of Fools* brought in its wake. After that, except for an occasional honor, it was downhill all the way.

Joan Givner's long biography[1] gives us the facts of Katherine Anne Porter's visible progress through the world. This life history rests on the bedrock of painstakingly acquired and established fact; few readers will begrudge the amount of sheer detail. The biography is long partly because the life ran on forever (regrettably, for in her last few years Porter suffered most of the ailments and debilities of extreme old age, and toward the end she alienated most of her remaining friends).

Unlike many literary biographers, Mrs. Givner does not finally despise her protagonist but somehow remains patient with a person whom it is easy to dislike: Porter was overwhelmingly vain about her appearance and her art, quick-tempered to a fault, foolishly opinionated and garrulous, conspicuously and almost compulsively untruthful, immoral (chiefly in using people promiscuously and then discarding them) while pretending to be the essence of morality, a near-alcoholic at her most demanding when influenced by drink, and ultimately, as Allen Tate said in 1941, a Great Personage whose egotism became so vast as to seem almost unpardonable. Many authors have shared these flaws; but few have dissembled so much and misled (and toyed with) so many different people—par-

[1] KATHERINE ANNE PORTER: A Life, by *Joan Givner*. Simon and Schuster. $19.95.

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ticularly publishers and fellow artists and critics—in the process.[2] Mrs. Givner remains objective and sympathetic and detached to the end.

There are weaknesses, however. Mrs. Givner's knowledge of the literary community is shaky, as is her familiarity with the publishing business. We don't learn as much as we should about Porter's relations with Liveright; the Modern Library; Harcourt, Brace; Atlantic–Little, Brown; and other publishers—nor are we fully informed about her editors and agents, formal and informal. Another drawback is that Porter so thoroughly dominates the canvas that no other figures achieve proper definition and significance. Her friend Josephine Herbst and her third husband, Eugene Pressly, do have a shadowy existence here; but most of the other characters are little more than names: whatever life they achieve usually results from their own words as quoted. Harrison Boone Porter, for example, the father of our heroine, had nothing to say for himself on paper and never seems more than a pasteboard figure. We can confidently infer that he lacked backbone (ambition, pluck, grit), that he was a father so ineffectual as to be a parent in name only to his children, that he suffered a terminal case of southern malaise (a disease limited to males that was virulent in the aftermath of the Civil War and that rendered them dependent on women for nearly everything). Porter's reconciliation in 1936 with this old incompetent is one of the great mysteries of her career. The biography is blessedly free of psychological jargon and speculation, but the author shows that the death of Porter's mother when she was a small child and her father's refusal to act responsibly (to hold a regular job, for instance) marked her for life, especially in her reckless pursuit of love. That pursuit went on for a shockingly long time—the length of most lives (seventy years or more)—and was never satisfactorily concluded. It involved four marriages and countless affairs, and the husbands and lovers (casual or serious in their ardor) included Albert Erskine, Matthew Josephson, and Allen Tate.

Porter's affairs of the heart had obvious recurring patterns: they were most satisfactory when brief, intense, and uncomplicated. She could not give herself to a person (or a place) for a sustained period, and her relationships that involved actual love and lust were quicksilver. Each of her marriages was disastrous, and the last (to Erskine) was almost as catastrophic in its failure and pain as the

[2] The artist has every right to use what he or she can in writing fiction, but one bridles when confronted by the enormity of Porter's lies as she duped people into supporting her work and into paying for trips, moves, and dwelling places. It is too bad that Mrs. Givner does not provide more evidence in this regard: it would be interesting to know how much Porter collected from, say, Monroe Wheeler or Glenway Wescott over several decades, and how much she repaid (nothing, apparently). She collected two advances totalling $850 for her never-finished biography of Cotton Mather; the victim, Horace Liveright, also paid for a dummy and a dustjacket. Later Donald Brace gave her two advances on the same "book"; and she bilked various other publishers, especially Doubleday, with other proposals that never came to fruition.

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long first marriage that she conveniently forgot—or tried to conceal and forget. Although Porter realized that for her the demands of art would always take precedence over the importunities of love (and the responsibilities of marriage), she could not rid herself of the persistent itch for love. This desire was essentially a thirst for adulation and service that could best be provided by a younger man. One of her most satisfactory "affairs"—with E. Barrett Prettyman, Jr., a distinguished Washington attorney who knew her late in her life—was platonic (but only by his choice apparently). For her, marriage could have worked only as a matter of convenience—which is to say that a wealthy man who wanted the same things she did might have struck an arrangement, or series of arrangements, satisfactory to her restless unfaithful temperament. The marriage that came closest to working—the third (to Pressly, a foreign-service officer)—Miss Porter described to him years later in a letter about their last meeting: "Wasn't it an odd, sixes-and-sevens . . . sort of visit, just our typical old time muddle. . . . A general brouhaha and rushing about. Then a little too much drink for we could never bear to be sober together, and then cross questions and crooked answers as usual, talk in ever widening and separating circles, until we were back at the same old blind alley we used to live in, if it could even be called living."

That love and its frustrations are a constant theme in her fiction is no wonder. Fiction embodied her effort to achieve order in a disorderly world, and especially in her own life. "My own habit of writing fiction," she wrote in "St. Augustine and the Bullfight," "has proved a wholesome exercise to my natural, incurable tendency to try to wangle the sprawling mess of our existence in this bloody world into some kind of shape." She continued in a different vein: "Perhaps my soul will be saved after all in spite of myself because now and then I take some unmanageable, indigestible fact and turn it into fiction; cause things to happen with some kind of logic—my own logic, of course—and everything ends as I think it should end and no back talk, or very little, from anybody about it. Otherwise, and except for this safety device, I should be the greatest liar unhung." In the confrontations her work provides between what E. B. White calls "the careful form of art, and the careless shape of life itself," art triumphs—but only by subtraction and reduction, as William Nance, John W. Aldridge and other critics have observed.

Porter's career had a long gestation: the author was over thirty when she was "discovered" by Carl Van Doren and her first two stories appeared in *Century*; and she was in her late thirties and early forties when her fiction began to be published regularly in such magazines as the *Southern Review* and the *Virginia Quarterly*. She was forty when *Flowering Judas*, her first collection, was released in 1930; and it would be five years before that book achieved respectable bulk (with the addition of five stories, notably "Hacienda"). With the publication of both editions of that book and all her subsequent books (until *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings*), Por-

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ter manipulated publishers to her advantage, showing herself as wise in the ways of writing and publishing as she was unwise in love.

Naturally she was slow to forge her mature (near-perfect) style, for she lacked formal education and had to learn nearly everything for herself until she was in middle age and began to gain literary friends and acquaintances like Josephson, Caroline Gordon, Wescott, Malcolm Cowley, and Hart Crane. Yet she was precocious, and you have to admire her talent (largely self-cultivated) for newspaper and advertising work, writing of all kinds, dancing, acting, and lecturing. She was especially adept at histrionics, off and on the stage. For the most part Porter was singlemindedly engaged in projecting and shaping a self—her own—while at the same time trying to impress an indifferent world in any way she could. As a friend who had known her well as a young woman put it to George Hendrick, "She rarely worked hard to create something, such as a story or a book. . . . What she has mainly striven for is the opportunity to *be* something and *do* something as she goes along."

What chronically undermined this relentless self-projection, as Mrs. Givner shows, was Porter's inability to discipline herself to write over long periods and to meet deadlines, and her habit of helplessly plunging into love affairs. ("Every new love affair held the promise of alleviating her sense of sexual failure, her failure to bear a child, to inspire and keep the love of a man of some substance.") That she finished and published as much prose as she did is in itself more remarkable than the fitful and uncertain and cramped ways in which her writing developed. Added to her burdens was the self-imposed fiction that she had grown up in plantation houses "full of books, bought generation after generation by members of the family," rather than in pinched quarters with little or no print to be had.

In such circumstances the limitations of Porter's symbolic imagination and the narrowness of her executive technique are understandable. And we come to realize that about as much of her energy went into re-creating her early life as into creating her stories. In this connection, Mrs. Givner is too inclined to point to a given person or incident as the exact basis for the fictive version: there is no precise ratio in these matters, and as R. P. Blackmur has argued, "The response of the artist is not single but cumulative." Porter described her difficulty in dramatizing her experience and the experience she appropriated from others when she spoke of the writer's dilemma: "When virtuosity gets the upper hand of your theme, or is better than your idea, it is time to quit." That observation, written in 1931, applies well to *Ship of Fools* (1962), a novel whose themes never quite cohere: the technical execution is at any given point superior to the conception. The novel lacks a center of gravity. The same is true of "The Leaning Tower," another fiction in which the author is betrayed by her racial and ethnic prejudices and her misunderstanding and oversimplification of history.

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It is also understandable that Porter was uncomfortable with ideas. Her repeated theme, as her biographer puts it, is that "evildoers are not the most reprehensible people. . . . The people who really need to be watched are the so-called innocents who stand by and allow others to perpetrate evil." The criticism is often tinged by moralistic dogmatism. What is astonishing is how far a small stock of ideas and a large stock of prejudices carried Katherine Anne Porter.

Mrs. Givner should be praised for her careful delineation of Porter's attitudes, especially the responses to art and criticism (including criticism of her own work). Porter scorned most critics of her fiction, especially George Hendrick, who unearthed some of her past long before she was ready to have it revealed. Malcolm Cowley, who gave her reviewing assignments at the *New Republic*, was also attacked. She damned even Lodwick Hartley, the earliest and (with Eudora Welty and Robert Penn Warren) the best and most sympathetic of her critics. (The biography is appropriately and generously dedicated to Hartley's memory.)

Katherine Anne Porter's life was drenched in paradox and irony. Endowed with the constitution of a mule, she enjoyed delicate health for ninety years, often driving herself to collapse. Posing as a person of unimpugnable integrity and absolute control, she was promiscuously self-indulgent. Presenting herself as a grande dame of the old South, she was born of a family not far removed from poor white trash (no white trash could have outdone her father in shiftlessness). Holding aloft the banner of love, she saved her love for herself, bullying her family and friends and lovers and husbands into submission. If the finished products of her writing were disciplined, the effort that went into them was disciplined only in short intense bursts; and the discipline of the art—the extreme control—offset the chaos of a life marked by whim and characterized by disorder. No one has registered these aspects of her nature so acutely as Allen Tate, whose life in many respects parallels hers: "She has few of the ordinary human satisfactions—she can't live in the world, she can't have a deep emotional relationship with anybody, she is always moving: in fact, she is trapped in a cycle of romantic emotions. . . . When the human personality suffers repeated failures in a fundamental objective experience, it recoils into self-worship, or at best a refined egoism."

Before self-worship overwhelmed her, Katherine Anne Porter created a little of the best short fiction of this century. (Unfortunately, that work is seldom considered for its art by Mrs. Givner, but is chiefly mined for details about its maker's life.) She also created and nurtured a legend of the self that stands as one of the most fascinating and deplorable instances of artistic egotism run amuck. We are indebted to Joan Givner for recovering the facts of a life considerably stranger than anything in the fiction that sprang from it, the fiction that provided the life we had known until now.

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MARVIN MUDRICK

# String Hoppers and Feary Fathers

BIOGRAPHY, AS DR. JOHNSON OBSERVES, is superior to history because it's more *useful*. "I have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. . . . The general and rapid narratives of history, which involve a thousand fortunes in the business of a day, and complicate innumerable incidents in one great transaction, afford few lessons applicable to private life, which derives its comforts and its wretchedness from the right or wrong management of things that nothing but their frequency makes considerable." History is too high and mighty to be taken to heart; private life is where we live, be it ever so humble; what concerns us all and concerns us most is the truth of private life; and autobiography is the most useful species of biography because nobody except "the writer of his own life has the knowledge of . . . [this] truth." Besides, biography is more fun than history ("the biographical part of literature . . . is what I love most," says Johnson); and autobiography—made up of odds and ends and therefore as unlike history (or fiction) as possible—is the most fun of all, or so at any rate the discreetest, artiest, unfunniest autobiography can't help being here and there if only by lucky accidents of recollection:

> The family home of Rock Hill was littered with snakes, especially cobras. The immediate garden was not so dangerous, but one step further and you would see several. The chickens that my father kept in later years were an even greater magnet. The snakes came for the eggs. The only deterrent my father discovered was ping-pong balls. He had crates of ping-pong balls shipped to Rock Hill and distributed them among the eggs. The snake would swallow the ball whole and be unable to digest it. There are several paragraphs on this method of snake control in a pamphlet he wrote on poultry farming.

—and other beasts show up like hotel guests in a little clearing of houses just outside the thick of the jungle:

> Once, when there was nobody staying in this bungalow except the cook, a leopard paced up and down the porch. This is the porch onto which we have moved all the beds and slept these last

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> three nights, telling each other ghost stories and feeling absolutely secure in the jungle heat. At one of the other bungalows guests have to sleep behind closed doors, for a bear comes regularly each night, climbs the stairs slowly as if exhausted, and sleeps on whatever free bed is available.[1]

Of course it can prove to be, not mere bits but most of it, an honest-to-goodness autobiography like Wole Soyinka's, featuring for instance such four-star attractions as the gourmet dishes of a Nigerian childhood: "the real treat was that rarest of delicacies—*leki*—made of crushed and skinned black-eyed beans and melon-seed oil, a teaspoonful of which, in the sharing, could cause week-long hostilities in the household"; or there's a salivating visit to an open-air market where cooks are preparing deep-fried soul-food, while

> we stood and gazed on the deftly cupped fingers of the old women and their trainee wards scooping out the white bean-paste from a mortar in carefully gauged quantities, into the wide-rimmed, shallow pots of frying oil. The lump sank immediately in the oil but no deeper than an inch or two, bobbed instantly to the surface, and turned pinkish in the oil. It spurted fat globules upwards and sometimes beyond the rim of the pot if the mix had too much water. Then, slowly forming, the outer crust of crisp, gritty light brownness which masked the inner core of baked bean paste, filled with green and red peppers, ground crayfish or chopped.[2]

Whereas back on a visit to Sri Lanka (the Ceylon of his childhood) Michael Ondaatje salivates with comparable enthusiasm but settles for menus: "anything that has string hoppers and egg rulang I eat with lascivious hunger"; "Sir John's breakfasts are legendary, always hoppers and fish curry, mangoes and curd." We're acquainted with mangoes and can begin to imagine fish curry and guess at what kind of curd he's talking about, but we've never heard of egg rulang or string hoppers—related to *grass*hoppers?—and he doesn't bother to describe the look or taste or sinful fragrance of any of them or how this or that one is coaxed and blended into the perfection or transcendence of itself. Soup, soup, beautiful soup.

On the other hand it can be an "autobiography" under false pretenses, subtitled "Memories of a Persian Boyhood" despite the fact that its last two hundred pages are altogether given over to a moral tale told by the childhood friend with whom in middle age the author has been reunited, an excessively enlightening account of the friend's adventures with a warm and human as well as omniscient

[1] RUNNING IN THE FAMILY, by *Michael Ondaatje*. Norton. $12.95.

[2] AKÉ: The Years of Childhood, by *Wole Soyinka*. Random House. $14.95.

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and sententious holy man (who does come up with a snapper now and then: "Man needs man, though it be only for disliking him"; even a stopped clock is right twice a day). Yet, in the first sixty pages of the book, there's an occasional exotic detail of private life in priest-ridden Iran—at the turn of the century, during the bad old days—that we wouldn't want to miss:

> The new *maktab* [elementary school] was located in an upper room of the mosque known as the Sayyed Mosque in the Bidābād quarter. The school belonged to the Ākhond [Muslim priest] Mollā Taqi whose thin, yellow face had no beard and "whose hat had no wool," as is said of ineffectual people. The special customs and habits which he made the fashion in his *maktab* ought, however, [to] be justifiably regarded as original and novel discoveries themselves in the science of pedagogy and education of His Honor. Among others, he had appointed one of the students, naming him Sniffer, who, to put it crudely, went around every time an unpleasant smell arose in the *maktab* environments [sic] and knelt on the ground in front of each student to distinguish the guilty from the innocent and the wicked from the good with the help of his sense of smell, and then Ākhond Mollā Taqi administered the law which must be obeyed "so that he will be ashamed of his weakness" with blows of his stick among the students.[3]

Evidently an orotund text and a wobbly translation; but the odor of sanctity is unmistakable, and Sniffer getting to the bottom of it earns a place in the annals (you should excuse the expression) of world religion.

I too have often thought that there has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. I specially enjoy the autobiographies of not very famous people; seek them out on library shelves; once, for example, came across and read through with pleasure the autobiography of one of Darwin's grandsons—he titled it *Life Is Sweet, Brother*—whose lifelong love of golf eased him into a delightful lifetime job as a golfing journalist, and who has as many deathless anecdotes and images and family quirks to share from the life as the rest of us if we could only write them down and make them into a book: "my eldest uncle, William, . . . looked, as my great-Uncle Ras justly remarked, 'so clean you could eat a mutton chop off him anywhere.' " Recumbent on this otherwise unspecified pristine expanse a well-done John-Bull (or Johnsonian) mutton chop to clinch the British image: another bracing whiff of ethnic soul-food (not—presumptuously universal—that priestly food for the soul with its unpardonable odor of sancti-

[3] ISFAHAN IS HALF THE WORLD: Memories of a Persian Boyhood, by *Sayyed Mohammad Ali Jamālzādeh*. Trans. by *W. L. Heston*. Princeton University Press. $37.50.

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ty), because things to eat are never far from the radiant center of the recoverable past, as when the local barber takes little Wole and Wole's cousin to his "farm" outside the Nigerian village, and they notice a snake in a tree (plenty of snakes in the Third World)—

> Broda Pupa nodded with satisfaction. "Good. I was just wondering what we would eat with our yam for lunch."
>
> I thought he was joking. "Nobody eats snakes," I said.
>
> He looked at me, a slow dawning in his eyes. "Ah, I forgot, ọmọ teacher. The teacher's children don't eat things like that. They eat bread and butter."
>
> "No, that is not what we eat. But nobody eats snakes."
>
> "Well, we'll soon see. . . . You, ọmọ Teacher, keep an eye on the snake. I think I'll cut the kind of sticks we need myself. Yemi, you gather the stones."
>
> "Suppose it jumps down?" I asked.
>
> "Speak English to it," Broda Pupa said, and left me alone.

Wole's father is headmaster of Aké's Christian school, where classes are conducted in English and Wole learns to devour books like one more variety of succulent soul-food. The father is called "HM" or, because of his initials as well as a talent for overpowering everybody with merciless ratiocination, "Essay":

> "All right, shall I tell Joseph to sharpen the cutlass?"
>
> The argument had started from that morning's sermon. It had gone a hundred different ways at different times and, as usual, the bookseller's gesticulating arms had fanned the embers back to life when every point had been exhausted. Now he seemed about to lose the arm. Still, he fought back. He always did.
>
> "Did I tell you that my right arm had offended me?". . .
>
> "Are you now saying that you are without sin?" the Catechist countered. . . .
>
> "Not so fast. Let's go over God's injunction again . . . it says nothing about committing a sin. My right hand may commit a sin, or my left. That makes it an offence against God. But that does not mean that *I* am offended. God may be offended, but it is up to him to take whatever action he pleases."
>
> Essay looked shocked. "You are now claiming that an offence against God is not to be regarded as an offence against man? You refuse to take God's side against sin?"
>
> Hastily, the bookseller reassured God. . . .
>
> Essay tested the edge of the cutlass with the tip of his thumb. The bookseller shouted: "But I tell you neither my left nor right hand has offended me."
>
> My father sighed. "Today is a Sunday, God's own day. Imagine you are standing before him. You are his servant, a respected sidesman in his church at St. Peter's. You insist that Christ's in-

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junctions are meant to be taken literally. All right, God is now asking you, has your right hand *ever* offended thee? Yes or no."

It was the sort of language which frightened me even more than the violence about to be visited on the bookseller. My father had the habit of speaking as if he was on first-name terms with God. . . . I expected any moment a Visitation worse than the bookseller would ever experience from this unequal contest.

Finally the bookseller flees in mortal terror, and there's a general laugh at his expense: a vestry-room sick joke; but Essay doesn't use his peculiar talent just to make jokes (and scare little boys); he's an ogre, as one of his staff—from this time forward known as "Lẹ́-mọ́ọ̀" ("Stick it back on!")—learns after picking a rose from Essay's garden:

My father admired the rose, then asked him, very ordinarily, where he had obtained it.

"Oh, in your garden of course, Headmaster."

Essay did not change his tone when he said, "Ah, I thought I recognized it. You like roses I see."

"Oh yes indeed sir. And I must congratulate you. Really, you have a wonderful garden. I never knew it or I would have visited it more often."

"Oh? So how did you discover I had a garden?"

"I was passing by sir, and your back gate was open. I saw the blooms through the opening and I could not believe my eyes. You hide your light under a bushel, Headmaster."

"Thank you," said Essay. And there the matter was left.

But left only for a while:

School over, he sent for Odejimi. "Ah yes, your rose. I can't quite remember who you said gave you permission to pluck a rose from the garden."

Odejimi looked puzzled, then corrected the mistake. "Oh no, I never said that anyone gave me permission."

My father looked surprised. "Really? You mean you just went into the garden and helped yourself."

"Precisely sir. I mean, I hope you don't mind." Very belatedly, Mr. Odejimi was beginning to get a message.

"Not at all," my father assured him. "But I would like you to return it now. You know, to the place where you found it."

There was a long silence. Odejimi briefly lost his syntax and appeared to stammer. . . .

The rest of this lengthy and immoderately painful and disquieting episode is lighted as if from the fires of hell by Essay's "thin

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pitying smile": Odejimi's "next specific act was to try and hold the dismembered rose to the stalk. He began by freezing a long time, staring into vacancy. Then he turned towards the flower-pot, his movement like a sleep-walker's, and again he held the rose to its parent stalk, pressing the two severed points together. When he let go, the rose fell into the bed. It was a big disappointment." Odejimi is eventually allowed to retreat to the farthest corner of the garden where he sits by himself dazed and desolate for many hours; and after Essay in the bosom of his family has led evening prayer and subsequently passed his usual unruffled period of serious reading on an ordinary evening in an educated Christian home in Aké, after this oh-so-civilized domestic routine in the Grand Inquisitor's quarters, then at last late at night Essay's "cool, measured voice" reaches and releases the victim. Nonetheless Essay is an affectionate and yielding husband: only intervention and persuasion by "Wild Christian"—as his wife is called—saves Stick-it-back-on from a grisli-er fate (if there could be such), and saves from maybe instant death little Wole, who as the result of a nervous gesture has inadvertently chopped off a row of Essay's rosebuds; he's (with a few exceptions including the one noted) an affectionate and attentive father; a be-nignant man of active Christian principle who ungrudgingly brings into his home orphans and other needy children by the dozen; a man neither coarse nor brutal; a pillar of the community.

The looming mad feary fathers of our childhood. In Ondaatje's book his father occupies even more space than Soyinka's in his; in-deed Mervyn Ondaatje is intended to be his son's tragic hero, a fall-en angel like Milton's Satan, or perhaps like Scott Fitzgerald's vision of himself because like Fitzgerald he's at least a crazy drunk:

> Humorous and gentle when sober [which may be so, but the au-thor doesn't document it], he changed utterly and would do any-thing to get alcohol. He couldn't eat, had to have a bottle on him at all times. If his new wife Maureen had hidden a bottle, he would bring out his rifle and threaten to kill her. He knew, even when sober, that he would need to drink again, and so buried bottles all around the estate. In the heart of his drunkenness he would remember where the bottles were. He would go into the fowl run, dig under chicken straw, and pull out a half bottle. The cement niches on the side of the house held so many bottles that from the side the building resembled a wine cellar.

On his "last train ride (he was banned from the Ceylon Railways after 1943)," as a major in the Ceylon Light Infantry during war-time, he is being sent for treatment of his alcoholism "to a military hospital in Colombo under the care of John Kotelawala," who how-ever "was knocked out by my father before he reached Galgamuwa.

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He never pressed charges. In any case my father took over the train":

> He made it shunt back and forth ten miles one way, ten miles another, so that all trains, some full of troops, were grounded in the south unable to go anywhere. He managed to get the driver drunk as well and was finishing a bottle of gin every hour walking up and down the carriages almost naked, but keeping his shoes on this time and hitting the state of inebriation during which he would start rattling off wonderful limericks—thus keeping the passengers amused [but not us, because the author wasn't told or doesn't remember or anyhow doesn't reproduce any of those limericks].

It's a family for crazy drinking, and the son has many (repetitive) stories beginning with the flaming youth of his parents and their numerous relatives and friends; but his father being the craziest and being also a father is presumed to merit a grand Shakespearean sendoff:

> Why of Shakespeare's cast of characters do I remain most curious about Edgar? Who if I look deeper into the metaphor, torments his father over an imaginary cliff. [But, deep as a well or wide as a church door, the metaphor has nothing to do with the father and son of *Running in the Family*.]
>
> Words such as love, passion, duty are so continually used they grow to have no meaning—except as coins or weapons. [Or as names for certain strong, persistent, and easily recognized feelings.] Hard language softens. I never knew what my father felt of these "things." My loss was that I never spoke to him as an adult. Was he locked in the ceremony of being "a father"? He died before I even thought of such things.
>
> I long for the moment in the play when Edgar reveals himself to Gloucester and it never happens. Look I am the son who has grown up. I am the son you have made hazardous, who still loves you. I am now part of an adult's ceremony, but I want to say I am writing this book about you at a time when I am least sure about such words. . . . Give me your arm. Let go my hand. Give me your arm. Give the word. "Sweet Marjoram". . . a tender herb. [ellipses M. O.'s]

But this tearful and literary apostrophe hasn't on the evidence of the book anything at all to do with the nearly homicidal boor and public nuisance it addresses.

"I arrived in a plane," writes Ondaatje, having returned to the island of his childhood ("back to the family I had grown from"), "but I love the harbour. . . . For years I loved the song, 'Harbour

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lights,' and later in my teens danced disgracefully with girls, humming 'Sea of Heartbreak.' There is nothing wise about a harbour, but it is real life . . ." and so on. Autobiography doesn't improve with fancy touches; or more properly in this instance a family memoir, because Ondaatje is too cagey to carry on much about li'l ol' me; what he does mainly is solicit on home ground from survivors a modest quota of family stories; but whether on the topic of himself or his family he aims at the level of literature. How does one dance "disgracefully"? Does he mean "incompetently"? "shamefully"? "sexily"? Probably he first thinks of "ungracefully" but judges it journalistic and makes a daring lunge away from mere sense. Or why does he deny that harbors are wise when nobody would ever dream of affirming it? He also quotes poetry: "Don't talk to me about Matisse," cries Lakdasa Wikkramasinha,

> the European style of 1900, the tradition of the studio
> where the nude woman reclines forever
> on a sheet of blood
> Talk to me instead of the culture generally—
> how the murderers were sustained
> by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote
> villages the painters came, and our white-washed
> mud-huts were splattered with gunfire.

—establishing that he's (they're) on the right (i.e. left) Third-World side. Are the mud-huts white-washed (in the poem or for real) so that the foreign devils shouldn't imagine the natives don't keep a clean mud-hut? because if there's one thing an old-time Ceylonese couldn't stand it was a dirty mud-hut. Looked tacky on picture postcards to chums in England.

Don't talk to me about Matisse / the European style of 1900 / or my disgraceful verse / because I'd a lot rather hear about blood. Hateful imperialists, who won't even leave the natives to their aboriginal dishes. In Iran, according to Jamālzādeh, "delicious Iranian foods . . . are disappearing" and "drinks made with sweet and sour syrup or yoghurt and cucumbers" are being displaced by "American drinks with amazing names" (but he's writing in 1955—from Geneva, where he has lived since 1931—and I doubt that RC Cola or Mountain Dew is on sale in Isfahan nowadays). Soyinka finds the beloved open-air markets of his childhood succeeded in Aké by glassed-in shops "with McDonald's hamburgers, Kentucky Fried Chicken, hot dogs and dehydrated sausage-rolls." But Jamālzādeh's friend's infallible holy man concedes that, whatever the virtues of Iranian cuisine, Iranian politics (as of 1955) still isn't what it might be: "For two thousand years, the helpless people of this country have been prisoners of a handful of unprincipled rogues and ras-

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cals and even now, for all those conversations coming up about tyranny and the need for justice and constitutions, no end to it is in sight."

There's no end to it, and (as Johnson bleakly notes) it affords few lessons applicable to private life:

> Despite its great size King's Square [in Isfahan, about 1905] was bursting and had turned into a stormy sea with troop after troop and group after group of men and women as waves and the ākhond's turbans in the center corresponding to foam that had settled on top of those waves. When we brought ourselves with a thousand trials and tribulations to the center of the multitude, we saw two respectable men surrounded and being beaten with the intent to kill! . . . Finally we hung onto an old man and said, "Please, uncle, for God's sake, what's going on?" Without even glancing at us, breathing hard he said, "It's a Bābi-killing! Hit them!" ["Bābism" is another name for the Bahá'í religious sect, whose members are being executed right now in 1983 by the Iranian government] and threw himself like a madman into the pandemonium. . . .
>
> Sticks and clubs, fists and open palms rose up and descended on top of the brains of those two men with no aides or allies . . . [and] the orthodox and pious men, with a savagery and lack of pity which still after forty years makes my body tremble at the mention, dragged them toward the King's Mosque, the seat of justice and equity for the supreme Islamic law. Meanwhile, an individual came up with a can of oil in one hand and a tin dipper in the other. In a wink, a fire rose toward the sky from the heads and bodies of the two men. Each of the riffraff with righteous piety bought a dipper of that oil for a hundred dinars and sprinkled it over those two faces. . . .

After such wide-screen public spectacles, almost anything private seems idyllic and fun: "The master feltmaker had two wives, and it was heard one day that when he was sleeping, one of his wives used his razor to cut his head off at the base of the neck on account of some grudge." Bring on the string hoppers and feary fathers! and graceful girls if there are any loose in the neighborhood.

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JEFFERSON HUNTER

# Browning and Browning

IN THE EYES OF FLUSH, Elizabeth Barrett's cocker spaniel—the spoiled and expensive favorite (three times he had to be ransomed from the dog-stealers), the companion of her invalid afternoons, the devourer of scraps from her plate—the male poet who came to call at Wimpole Street on a certain May afternoon in 1845 was disquietingly masterful: a man who strode, who twisted his yellow gloves in his hands, who sank into a chair by Flush's mistress's sofa and began instantly to talk. Impossible to think that such a man, a man of such dreadful boldness, should interest Miss Barrett, and yet her eyes blazed as Flush had never seen them blaze. Through the long afternoon poet and poetess talked and talked. Neglected, jealous, Flush longed to attack (the authority for his longings is Virginia Woolf, who in 1933 published *Flush: A Biography*); he longed to bite Robert Browning's trousers.

In the eyes of Henry James, Browning was equally disquieting: an oddity, a paradox. James knew him in society, in London dinner parties and in the circle surrounding the American sculptor William Wetmore Story, and James found Browning altogether in and of that society. Impossible to think that such a drinker of port and raconteur should be the author of *Men and Women*. There were two Brownings, James decided, the diner-out and the private man, and the latter guarded his privacy, from which came his poetry, with strange intensity. The two Brownings piqued James's curiosity at least until the writing of "The Private Life" in 1893; in that story Browning becomes Clare Vawdrey, "the greatest . . . of our literary glories" who nevertheless in company is always "loud and liberal and cheerful," a purveyor of "sound and second-rate opinions," and a conversational bully ("There was a general understanding among us that when Vawdrey talked we should be silent").

It will be seen that the canine and Jamesian views indicate the same problem, the overwhelming obviousness of the external features of Browning's life—the dandyish dress and exuberant manner, the physical energy, the bumptious opinionizing, the relentless conviviality. These things were very much in sight, even on deliberate display; somewhere out of sight was the Browning who could fascinate Elizabeth Barrett (by letter, before he ever saw her in person) and who, forgetting himself entirely, could slip into the mind and voice of a bishop, a madman, a murderer, a Pippa, a Caliban. The practical problem for Browning's biographers is not simply

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that there are two Brownings to deal with, but that the life of one is abundantly documented, the life of the other relatively inaccessible. Whatever they may wish to say about Browning's poetic imagination, what biographers have at their disposal is a chronicle of non-poetic events:

> For Browning at least there was consolation [he had been troubled by the death from fever of Story's son Joe] among the lively community of writers and painters in Rome. Thackeray was a visitor to the temporary home which they had set up in the Via Bocca di Leone, as were Fanny Kemble the actress and her sister Mrs Adelaide Sartoris. It was there, to the convalescent Edith Story, that Thackeray read an unpublished tale, *The Rose and the Ring*. Browning's own skill in amusing children was seen on a later visit to Rome. At one of Story's parties he read "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" to the children, Hans Andersen read "The Ugly Duckling," and Story, playing the flute, acted as piper to lead the assembly through the palatial Barberini apartments.

Though pleasant to read, such a passage hardly brings us closer to the Browning we want to understand.

Still less are we brought close to that Browning by reports of the dinner parties which figure so largely in his public life (as they figure largely in the lives of all the Victorian men of letters): the party given by Browning's patron W. J. Fox in 1835, at which the young author of *Paracelsus* met the tragedian Macready; the select supper after the first night of Talfourd's *Ion*, again with Macready, and with Walter Savage Landor on one side of the actor, William Wordsworth on the other; the 1864 dinner at the York Gate house of Francis Palgrave, editor of *The Golden Treasury*, which included among the guests Browning, Tennyson, Gladstone, the sculptor Thomas Woolner, Dr John Ogle, "a leading specialist in nervous diseases," and Gifford Palgrave, "diplomat and Arabian traveller." Perhaps Browning conversed with such men "upon equal terms," thereby demonstrating the "capacity of his mind and the force of his utterance," but what do we really know of the conversation upon such occasions? What did the creator of Karshish the Arabian physician and Palgrave the Arabian traveller have to say to each other, or the creator of Johannes Agricola and the specialist in nervous diseases? In any case the capacity of Browning's mind and the force of his utterance have to be demonstrated far away from York Gate—in words, on the page, in poetry, in the post-prandial monologue, say, wherein the worldly Bishop Blougram, a conversational bully in Browning's own mold, lingeringly exposes the shabbiness of the journalist Gigadibs.

Donald Thomas' *Robert Browning: A Life Within Life*,[1] from which I

[1] ROBERT BROWNING: A Life Within Life, by *Donald Thomas*. Viking. $18.75.

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have been quoting, does not overcome this problem of imbalance, the external life overwhelming the internal. Barring the discovery of a journal, no one will overcome it; the creative Browning guarded his privacy well. But Thomas acknowledges the problem and analyzes it suggestively. Adopting a phrase from Adler's *Individual Psychology,* he argues that while Browning the diner-out simply accepted a conventionally successful life, the poet made for himself a "life within life," the characteristic refuge, Adler says, of the supremely ambitious. The criminal, the neurotic, the pietist, and the artistic types retreat into lives within lives, creating little universes closed to outsiders. There they release pent-up energies (the artistic, of course, in the act of creation), such energies being seen in the outer life only in flashes (in Browning's case, sudden outbursts of anger or prurience). Reasonably enough, Thomas identifies the first clear perspective on Browning's life within life as the two Madhouse Cell poems, "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" and "Porphyria's Lover," and he points out that the non-artistic types Adler postulates as having lives within lives—the criminal, the neurotic, and the pietist—are exactly those types Browning wrote about most often and with greatest success. From his private world, fascinated and perceptive, the poet peered into the private world of the Duke in Ferrara or the monk in his Spanish cloister or Johannes Agricola, guiltless forever, looking through the gorgeous roof of heaven to God's fixed smile.

Thomas' is not the wittiest life of Browning. G. K. Chesterton's 1903 volume in the English Men of Letters series retains that title, as even brief quotation will demonstrate:

> *Pauline* appeared anonymously in 1833. It exhibits the characteristic mark of a juvenile poem, the general suggestion that the author is a thousand years old.
>
> Charity was [Browning's] basic philosophy; but it was, as it were, a fierce charity, a charity that went man-hunting. He was a kind of cosmic detective who walked into the foulest of thieves' kitchens and accused men publicly of virtue.

But after all in 1903 Chesterton had to be prudish about some sexually outspoken passages in Browning, and Chesterton made mistakes (he thought Elizabeth Barrett's invalidism was the result of a spinal injury; she was in fact tubercular). Donald Thomas, insofar as I can judge the matter, does not make mistakes. He is an adroit sifter of facts. His chapters on Browning's youth, probably the happiest youth ever experienced by a major English poet, seem particularly perceptive. The atmosphere of Browning's Camberwell, the devoted generosity of his parents, the pictures in the gallery of Dulwich College nearby, the influence of the family's Congregationalism, early theatrical enthusiasms (the twenty-year-old Browning saw

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and was impressed by Edmund Kean in one of his last performances as Richard III)—all these are duly evaluated as factors in the young poet's education. It is characteristic of Thomas to mention that a print of Caravaggio's Perseus and Andromeda was Browning's favorite as a child, and then not to make heavy weather of possible connections between the mythical rescue and Browning's rescue of Elizabeth Barrett, or for that matter Caponsacchi's rescue of Pompilia. Characteristic too is Thomas' even-handed discussion of the writers influencing Browning: Shelley, the "sun-treader," of course, but also Nathaniel Wanley, author of *Wonders of the Little World:* or, *A General History of Man in Six Books*, a compendious source of the grotesque and obscure. Thomas is clearly an admirer of Browning's poetic achievements and (as anyone must be) of Browning's intellectual and moral energy, but his purpose is to understand, not champion, as is shown in his detached commentary on a notorious episode from Browning's later years. Edward Fitzgerald slighted Browning's dead wife in a letter (a letter published six years after his death), and Browning replied with a startlingly savage twelve-line poem in which kicking and spitting figure prominently. The memory of Elizabeth Barrett Browning was not something about which Browning could be temperate; to the end of his days he believed hers had been the larger genius and the greater poetic talent.

On individual poems Thomas is judicious if brief, making even *Fifine at the Fair* and *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* potentially interesting, though nothing Thomas can say about sources and psychological drives can make the reader forget the garrulousness which mars these and other late volumes. After *The Ring and the Book* Browning's poetry "talks everybody down" (as Gladstone's daughter Mary said of one Browning performance at a dinner party), whereas before it is specially distinguished by its compression of meaning within strict limits, its knowledge of when to stop. In his famous tribute to "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St Praxed's Church," Ruskin was quite right to emphasize this early poem's dense brevity: "It is nearly all I said of the central Renaissance in thirty pages of the 'Stones of Venice' put into as many lines . . . "

Thomas is too acute and too modern a critic to indulge in Browning Society pretentiousness, in the late nineteenth-century habit of regarding Browning as a philosopher, a profound religious thinker, or a sunny, soul-uplifting optimist. Neither "Prospice" nor "Rabbi ben Ezra" occupies him for long. Yet in all his discussions of the poetry Thomas concentrates with odd stubbornness on Browning's ideas—giving, for instance, an exemplary account of the religious ideas dramatized in "Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day"—while neglecting the verbal texture of the ideas. In other words Thomas is not very interested in style or technique. "Casual phrases," he says of lines in "A Toccata of Galuppi's," and argues that the casualness

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more effectively chills the Victorian heart than Tennyson's lamentations. Well, yes, but "casual phrases" hardly does justice to the poem's management of rhythm, whether buoyant or, at the end, faltering—"what's become of all the gold / Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old"—or to the unerring choice of the unexpected though right word—"Death stepped *tacitly* and took them where they never see the sun." Alongside the story of Browning's intellectual and emotional development there is a story of stylistic development to be told.

Thomas says that he hopes his book will persuade readers of biography to become readers of Browning's poetry. Perhaps, but I suspect that accounts of Browning's childhood or love of Italy or devotion to his wife or imbroglios with Lady Ashburton, however well narrated (and Thomas does narrate them well), will do less to make readers of Browning than would accounts of how he discovered a style both unmistakably his own and unmistakably suited to the speakers of his dramatic monologues, of how he got from the Shelley-derived vaporings of *Pauline*,

> Still I can lay my soul bare in its fall,
> Since all the wandering and all the weakness
> Will be a saddest comment on the song,

to such a passage as the conclusion of "Pictor Ignotus":

> So, die my pictures! surely, gently die!
> O youth, men praise so,—holds their praise its worth?
> Blown harshly, keeps the trump its golden cry?
> Tastes sweet the water with such specks of earth?

What other passage in English poetry is so "Browningesque"—that is, at once so eloquent and so odd?

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

# Master-Workers and Others

THE FIRST FOUR BOOKS OF POETRY which I will review in this chronicle are attractive and unusual for their sustained complexity. The contemporary lyric is in general too short, so that poets leave their thoughts unfinished, and rarely tell a story. And it is too thin: the intellectual and sensory texture is threadbare, and the vocabulary undistinguished. The rest of the books I will treat have their fine points, but suffer in varying degrees from this poetic malnutrition.

Amy Clampitt's *The Kingfisher*[1] is an astonishing first collection, wise, expansive, and rich in verbal invention. Her formal strategies and gorgeous vocabulary never fail her, whether her synthetic vision falls upon Bellagio, Manhattan, Tepoztlán, or Des Moines. The collection as a whole strikes me as an inverted *Purgatorio*, beginning in the earthly paradise of Louise Dickinson Rich's Acadia in Maine, descending through different stages of moral formation to a frightening glimpse of our Netherworld, where "the stripped hydrocarbon / burns like a bush, a gaseous plume / midway between Wilmington and Philadelphia." And Clampitt is not afraid to face the spiritual and political implications of the descent.

The instruments of purification in Purgatory are fire and water; Clampitt makes constant use of these ambiguous elements. Fire lights the hearth of a cottage in Acadia, dazzles from a million sundews in bogs of sphagnum moss, multiplying itself in reflection like love. It is divided among transhumant Americans trying to get home for a holiday or funeral in

> a Candlemas
>
> of moving lights along Route 80, at nightfall,
> in falling snow, the stillness and the sorrow
> of things moving back to where they came from.
> "A Procession at Candlemas"

It is also the uncertain gift of Prometheus to our generation, our "fire-drinking vampires of hydrocarbon," cloned offspring of the phoenix: "a thousand replicas in upright silos," the self-immolation of Norman Morrison on the steps of the Pentagon in 1965.

[1] THE KINGFISHER, by *Amy Clampitt*. Knopf. $11.95; $6.95.

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Water is the recurrent dream of drowning and redemption, where Clampitt finds herself

> face to face with the transparent strata
> of experience, the increment of years,
> as a wall of inundation, the drowned mosaic
> glimmering above the flood plain.
> "Rain at Bellagio"

Dante's Purgatory is a middle ground where the claims of Pope and Emperor, the distinct but interlocking structures of Augustine's two cities, can be contemplated. So too "Rain at Bellagio" is a dramatic and moving account of a final visit with a friend who has decided to quit her rich, cosmopolitan family for a convent. The sound of water runs through Clampitt's ambivalent acceptance of her friend's decision.

> At the Abbey, between the shored-up Norman church
> and the trefoiled oak of the pilgrim hostel,
> running liquid and garrulous through a life of silence,
> cushioned and tended between banks of tamed wildflowers,
> the sound of water: indivisible, unstilled,
> unportioned by the bells that strike the hours.

Donald Davie's latest book, *Three for Water Music*,[2] is a composite of three reflections on water and the long poem "The Shires," Davie's idiosyncratic commentary on each of the English shires. The whole book is dense and finely balanced, another welcome product by one of the master-workers of our language.

In "The Fountain of Cyanë," Davie writes about poetry with the fluency of Dryden, but a wholly modern irreverence for mythical subjects and a reflexive irony towards poetry's ability to gloze over even the most terrible events. The occasion is his visit to the pool of Cyanë in Sicily where, on Ovid's account, Persephone was carried off by the Lord of the Underworld and her grief-stricken companion Cyanë wept herself into a pool.

> Sky-blue, dark-blue, sea-green, cerulean dyes
> Dye into fables that we hoped were lies
> And feared were truths. A happy turn, a word,
> Says they are both, and nothing untoward.

Considering the springs of inspiration and the poet's way of drawing upon them, Davie argues that poetry requires formality, but not so that it suppresses the anarchic violence which is part of

[2] THREE FOR WATER MUSIC, by *Donald Davie*. Carcanet. $6.50p.

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the truth of reality. Language should crack a little for grief into fault-traceries on the perfection of form. Epiphanies "like the closed-off / Precincts all right, but never / When those exult in their closures." Moreover, poetry requires a subject which, though it may not have the necessity of existence, should at least be a postulate useful for making sense of life, one of those permanent myths that explain, for instance, why we endure long winter nights and trust in the return of summer's daughter.

"Wild Boar Clough" attests to Davie's strongly ambivalent feelings about English Protestantism in all its religious, political and cultural ramifications. For a Puritan poet can only be a "Burning, redundant candle, / Invisible at noon":

> We are, in our way, at worship,
> Though in the long-deflowered
> Dissenting chapel that
> England is, the slim
> Flame of imagination,
> Asymmetrical, wavers,
> Starving for dim rose-windows.

"The Fountain of Arethousa" mirrors the poet again, this time with the past behind him. In "Gratitude, Need and Gladness" he acknowledges his debt towards the inhabitants of the everyday for the small glories he finds there. Thus it is not Shelley's grandiosity he praises, but rather his own mother's way of reciting Shelley, which first turned him to poetry and to which he turns again now, in memoriam.

Most of Charles Martin's *Passages from Friday*[3] consists of the title poem, a long narrative written in rhymed quatrains of seventeenth-century almost-English by Martin's Defoe's Friday. Saved from enemies by his strange European *Master,* Friday tries to accommodate himself to the new world-view. Privately, however, he judges much of Crusoe's behaviour to be inappropriate: he shoots parrots when they learn his name, and cuts down a tree for a war canoe although it is clearly inhabited by a woman's spirit.

Nonetheless Friday tries both to follow his *Master*'s orders and to pay attention to the spirit-world; hollowing out the canoe, he finds it will only take on a woman's shape. When Crusoe rigs up a system of pulleys and wires to carry the massive boat down to the ocean, the contraption won't work.

> . . . for nothing he ever did was done with Ease
> of Natur; for, according to *Providence,*
> all Things had Value ownly from ther *Use,*
> and had no *Feelings* or *Intelligence,*

[3] PASSAGES FROM FRIDAY, by *Charles Martin.* Abattoir Editions. np

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which we call *Spirit;* and which they did without;
he call'd me *Savage,* that I cou'd not see
how Things were Tools & how thes Tools allow'd
us to master mor Things: For it appear'd to me

that it was them that master'd us; by making
us work so mutch for What we little needed;
and, when we wanted them, by all Ways breaking;
so that they labour'd rather less than we did.

How Friday is wooed by the tree-spirit but remains faithful to his *Master,* only to be abandoned in the end to solitude and a madness half-way between civilization and magic, readers should discover for themselves. The charm, dark irony and formal bravura of Martin's lyric poetry here proves itself, like the woman in the tree, quite capable of filling out the contours of a longer form.

Sydney Lea's second book of poetry, *The Floating Candles,*[4] draws as his first book did on life-long experience as a hunter in the New England woods, but with increasing clarity and assurance. "Ghost Signs, Seasons, Earth and Air," an extended poem in three sections, is dedicated to various hunting companions—father, uncle, brother, friends, hunting dogs. Lea's contempt for "the well-groomed hordes of new-age mountain farmers" is telling; his vision of nature and our relation to it is at once much harsher and more acute than theirs. They leave millet on the ground for the "pheasants" which are really partridges and couldn't reach the snow-covered grain in any case. Partridge can take care of themselves in winter.

If times are hard,
they'll chew on hemlock tips like deer. I shot one
out of season once, on a slow day's rabbit hunt. He tasted
like the hemlock tree itself. And speak about "organic"!
The bird becomes his feed: in autumn, filled with fruit
from vine or thorn, his craw's a case of jewels . . .

Only a woodsman knows these things, and the unexchangeable value of the forest's inhabitants, prey, predator and fellow creature.

"The Feud" is a narrative poem taken in spirit if not in fact from the backwoods, a heart-sinking tale of revenge and the secret mechanisms of guilt and rage. It is powerfully written, effective as story, psychological portrait and poetry. With *The Floating Candles,* Lea displays the full range of his gifts. Side by side with this piece of country gothic are tender lyrics for his children ("Dead of Winter, Echo, Daughter," "The Spherical Prism"), elegies for his brother Mahlon ("The Floating Candles," "Dirge for My Brother: Dawn to

[4] THE FLOATING CANDLES, by *Sydney Lea.* University of Illinois Press. $10.50; $4.95.

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Dawn"), pure celebrations of the natural order, and even a painting-poem, "Battle," about George Bellow's brutal rendition of a boxing match, "Both Members of this Club":

> Yet somewhere now an actual toilet bowl
> stands ready to take the kidney's ring of blood,
> real blood, for somewhere there's a canvas
> flecked with the actual colors of election.
> This isn't the rose gore of old Romance.
> The loser's eyes turn inward to the blackness.
> The winner's eyes turn upward to the blackness.
> We look, and say, The Battle is a dance.

Each of the next four books is distinctive in its own way, well worth reading, but with an inconsistently maintained level of craftsmanship. Certain poems in each collection are too slight really to merit inclusion, while others are beautifully achieved. I would advise readers of D. M. Thomas' *Selected Poems*,[5] for example, to go through the book backwards. The more personal poetry at the beginning which deals with his family's roots in Cornwall and with love often mentions people dear to the poet without providing enough context for the reader to share his concerns. But the best poems, which cluster towards the end, exhibit that play of sensuality, cool intellect and compassionate recreation which characterizes *The White Hotel.*

"Fathers, Sons and Lovers" is a series of allusive, closely-rhymed letter-poems between Freud, Helen Deutsch, Lou Salome and Victor Tausk, a suicide and one of Freud's most gifted disciples. The letters weave the nexus of love and work which both fostered and destroyed the people within it. "Requiem for Aberfan" is a memorial for the Welsh coal-mining village where a schoolful of children was buried in 1966, in the perspective of various people left behind. The "Marriage of Venice to the Sea on Ascension Day" is a brilliant verbal fugue of sonnets which evokes the gold and blue elaboration of Venice, Titian's Danäe and the poetry of Gaspara Stampa. A poet of the early sixteenth century, she wrote of the man who abandoned her, "He in whom I find new perfections, as a trained eye finds out new stars."

> A high wind blows in salt to her cloaked face.
> Night's hymen's broken, her reflection breaks
> Under her. A cannon's boom. Carnival shouts.
> The rising flood becomes the meeting-place
>
> Of fireflies and contagion. From her despair,
> A phrase. Out of it new perfections rise.

[5] SELECTED POEMS, by *D. M. Thomas.* Viking/Penguin. $15.75; $7.95.

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A sonnet begins to live. From the wide sea,
Images, like the Doge's gondolas,

Negotiate into lagoons, canals.
The whole world's waters move through a cold form.
Most flow away again. Poetry's stone

Walks on the waters, rises, vanishes.
Even the flowing out she gathers in,
Building out of all loss a Venice, love.

Though Rika Lesser has published three books of translations (Rilke, Hesse and Ekelöf), *Etruscan Things*[6] is her first volume of original verse. Each poem answers to an Etruscan artifact or site, and the book as a whole is arranged according to the plan of the *templum caeleste,* the double vault of their heaven. The last poem in the cycle ends in the northeastern, left-handed, most auspicious quadrant, where Tinia, the supreme deity, had his dwelling places.

Lesser took on the project of giving voice to this mute civilization (still without a Rosetta stone) by visiting excavations and museums and reading widely, especially George Dennis' classic nineteenth-century study and Lawrence's *Etruscan Places.* Dennis wrote that the Gorgoneion is "a bronze lamp of such surpassing beauty and elaboration of workmanship as to throw into the shade every toreutic work yet discovered in the soil of Etruria." In her poem "Gorgoneion," Lesser manages to combine precise description with lyric invention. The Gorgon at the center of the lamp breaks into stony life, and we know exactly how she is situated, wreathed in satyrs, sirens and various animals.

. . . My mind is clear: clear
oil, life's vital blood. A wreath of asps,
tight crimping strands of hair set my scalp,
my brain, my heart on fire. And when I think,
memory lights these wicks, makes passion
run and burn from sphere to sphere: fire
of earth, of water and of air.

The book's first half, *Pars Dextra,* corresponds to the unlucky right-hand side of the sky-vault. It ends with a poem about two small votive figurines, an unhappy couple: the woman's knees are locked, the man has a large erect phallus and they are bound together with a triple chain. The last poem of the book, which completes the *Pars Sinistra,* provides a fitting anti-symmetry with the testimony of the "Sarcophagus of the Married Couple" in the Villa Giulia, Rome.

[6] ETRUSCAN THINGS, by *Rika Lesser.* George Braziller. $10.95; $4.95.

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> Sharing the single bed, how close
> we lie; fingers curved over palms
> whose fable reads: conjugal bliss
> is possible.
>
> "Degli Sposi"

*Etruscan Things* is not wholly successful in its rendering of Etruria into verse. The language sometimes fails in music and originality, especially when the burden of description is too heavy. And Lesser does not always convey the vivacity of the monuments she has seen. All the same, unlike most books of poetry written today, *Etruscan Things* exacts and rewards study.

The title poem of Gillian Clarke's *Letter from a Far Country*[7] is a long letter, posted "from a far country" by a housewife to those whom (it seems) she has left behind. The poem is remarkable for its successful management of ambivalence. Clarke lives in the countryside of South Wales, near the sea, and the sea here becomes both a source of anarchic freedom calling her away, and another household: "The sea stirs restlessly between / the sweetness of clean sheets, / the lifted arms, / the rustling petticoats."

Clarke honors the frustration of women caught in a daily round of church and kitchen, "mixing rage with the family bread," as well as the ceremony and importance of domestic life:

> Familiar days are stored whole
> in bottles. There's a wet morning
> orchard in the dandelion wine;
> a white spring distilled
> in elderflower's clarity;
> and a loving, late, sunburning
> day of October in syrups
> of rose hip and the beautiful
> black sloes that stained the gin to rose.

At the end of the poem it becomes clear that the protagonist has fled only in imagination. The far country still beckons, but houses must always be kept. The questions are: Shall they be kept freely? By whom, and in what order?

The shorter poems composing the rest of the book are always pleasing in their Welsh music, but many fail to develop the perception which sparks them. The ones which do ("Llyr," "Ram," "Scything") are worth learning by heart.

Rebecca Newth lives in the Connecticut countryside, and has much in common with Gillian Clarke. *Finding the Lamb*[8] is her third book of poetry and prose. Like Clarke, she is always respectful of

[7] LETTER FROM A FAR COUNTRY, by *Gillian Clarke*. Carcanet. $7.00.
[8] FINDING THE LAMB, by *Rebecca Newth*. Open Book/Station Hill. $4.95p.

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the cycles of rural and domestic life; and she too sometimes fails to carry a poem sufficiently out of its beginnings. While her work has less apparent melody than Clarke's, her terse diction is attractive and strikingly original. I believe that she knows how to talk to children, for her poems have the arresting simplicity of childish speech, though always tempered by an adult's grave, sympathetic distance:

> When my daughter comes home she brings me
> her cold stone to warm in my hands,
> she brings me silence
> for me to lay on a table,
> she brings me her anger, too, and I am sorry.
> I think of a whole small potato,
> brown and listening
> through its skin.
>
> "The Potato"

The title sequence, "Finding the Lamb," is a reserved account of losing a child. Newth never descends to melodrama, never lets the terror of her experience explode the language, though the lines of stress are evident. But grief is there, all the more poignant for its understatement. Going out at night in January to check on the new lambs, finding them safe, she is torn by fear, resentment and sadness, "because the night had kept a child / of mine, the great black night / and the new day as well."

I have stronger reservations about the last four books. Each in its own way exhibits the besetting error of modernism, which uses images to mask failures of clarity and amplification. *In the House of the Judge*[9] is Dave Smith's seventh (major) book. The intensity and range of his work has attracted many admirers, including myself, but here I would like to make two kinds of objections to his style.

On the one hand, it is too plain. Clampitt, for example, uses the following words successfully in the space of twenty lines: gingersnap, shuttlebus, pimp, Psychiatric Assessment, tumbleweed, pigweed, amaranth and moly (the herb which Hermes gave Odysseus against Circe). Smith's vocabulary, in contrast, is ordinary, though he gives the impression of verbal variety through odd juxtapositions. Part III of this book is dedicated (I think) to a girl named Celia, whom he invokes in "Love Blows in the Spring":

> Come down, then, come on, and I will lie
> clotted, stilled, a horizon,
> as your eyebrows, snowed, blink back
> and the black spruce of the witchy night

[9] IN THE HOUSE OF THE JUDGE, by *Dave Smith*. Harper & Row. $13.50; $7.50.

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shall weld us rib and rib to the ice of her
springing spine.

But this is a false richness, because it doesn't add up. What are we to make of the vague identification of the "I," the horizon and "your eyebrows," all of which are clotted, stilled and snowed? Or of the spruce-night-spine, black, witchy and icy? Words are for making articulations, not image-soup.

On the other hand, it is not plain enough. The section on Celia makes allusion to a romance, but Smith never gives us enough information to understand it. Who was Celia? What was the poet-persona's relation to her? How did she die? Was it suicide, and, if so, what drove her to it? Another characteristic quasi-narrative is the book's first poem, "Building Houses," where a minor catastrophe involving two boys and an old woman occurs as a house is being built. But what exactly happened and how the boys are implicated is never explained; the poem is riddled by nouns and pronouns without assignable referents. Unless Smith is willing to reveal more of the story, he has no right to elevate the house to a position of such enormous significance, as he does at the end of the poem.

I know what hope bears, the unbuilt,
that dream of grace raging—
but where are the builders
who nail the dark and the light,
who rose freed, singing together?
Where is our home, our sorrow and love?

If Smith would say what he means without the blocked references and periphrasis, it would be easier to judge his poetry. But then he would have to use richer language, and work harder at constructing stories.

Lucille Day's *Self-Portrait with Hand Microscope*[10] brings a novel and stimulating context to contemporary poetry, the world of the laboratory. (She is a science education consultant.) Sometimes her vision is calmly panoptic, as in "The Lab":

My snails caress
the planetary stillness,
dropping opaque eggs
to settle among the elements.

Sometimes, as in the poem "Neurochemist," it is as violent as the lab technician's mode of analysis:

[10] SELF-PORTRAIT WITH HAND MICROSCOPE, by *Lucille Day*. Berkeley Poets' Workshop and Press. $4.95p.

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I select a cage containing five pink-eyed
puffs of white fur, and take my scissors—rusted,
blood-stained, and dulled from cutting through bone.

It's the brain I want, with its stellate cells
and elegantly fluted lobes . . .

But although in certain passages Day manages to convey the collision of worlds (microscopic and macroscopic) and intentions (the desire to understand synthetically, and the urge to dismantle) which science represents, her poems are for the most part fragmentary. They are stage settings for a drama which is never mounted, as if Day were unwilling to think through the connections between the visible and invisible, instrument and creature, human passions and the underlife of nature. Other poems, particularly those on her early marriage, suggest a narrative gift which, if developed and tied to her theoretical concerns, might win her an important place in American letters.

W. S. Di Piero is another poet who does himself a disservice by not finishing the stories in his book *The First Hour.*[11] His evocations of Italy ("Introduction of Biscuits and Coffee in Bologna," "Sabbioneta to Parma") indicate a rich experience which has found (so far) only incomplete expression. Poems like the wonderful "Career Gypsy" reveal his gift for the delineation of character. In Bologna during *Carnevale,* for example, the gypsy reflects on

. . . a column of students
jamming their voices down Via Zamboni. They seem
to love the routine of change.

Their parents can probably afford it.
The closest I get to revolution is
by cranking up my music machine.

"Make revolution a habit," they say,
"Give the world back to the Poor."
I could have sold them one of my cartwheels.

But the character is still in search of a habitable fiction.

Di Piero's poems are often disrupted by the inexplicable image, that siren of surrealism. "The Music of Space," on the death of his father, is clearly intended to engage our feelings. But it lifts out of emotional reach with the lines,

He saw himself in his finished time
as an athlete of glass keening down corridors

[11] THE FIRST HOUR, by *W. S. Di Piero.* Abattoir Editions. $15.00.

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of bamboo stalks and silver grass
where blue foxes hassle wrens
and dingo is king of the plain.

Though Di Piero suggests later in the poem that the father (and son as well, perhaps) dream of foxes and deserts, the dream itself is not explained. So the reader never knows how to take these images to heart.

Thomas Luhrmann's *The Objects in the Garden*[12] is a more thoroughgoing illustration of the futility of the surrealist project. Of the unstructured metonymy in his poems, the garden objects, he says: "... they harbor a certain mystery.... It is as if they were signs from and of another world." So they are both meaningful, connected by reference to a transcendent realm, and not meaningful, since this "uncertain age" provides no connections. Without access to the transcendence which he invokes, I can't construe, for example, this "Little Epiphany":

The sun, and its court,
have moved far to the south.
The tanker is slowly being loaded.
When it is heavy in the water
it will move off to the south
and we'll be face to face
with the empty pier

and the knowledge
that it's never enough
to deal with the private hurts
of individuals.

Will we indeed? Why? Only the poet knows, and he hasn't chosen to reveal his secrets.

[12] THE OBJECTS IN THE GARDEN, by *Thomas Luhrmann*. Wesleyan University Press. $15.00; $6.95.

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JEROME MAZZARO

# Light Flesh Singing Lightly: James Wright's Final Manuscripts

JUST BEFORE HIS DEATH in March of 1980, James Wright gave Galway Kinnell a copy of the manuscript of *This Journey* and indicated that it was "more or less done."[1] Some small changes occurred before the text became final, but few readers will argue either with the quality of the poems that remain or with the direction that they chart. Like *Two Citizens* (1973) and *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* (1977), the new volume draws a view of America in contrast to Europe. The contrast centers on the impact of the collapse of religion on what is a relatively new culture still battling with nature and what are older, settled cultures whose traditions cushion radical shifts in thought. Rather than shape this difference into a Romantic "intellectual Declaration of Independence" as had Ralph Waldo Emerson in "The American Scholar" (1837), Wright follows Henry Adams in seeing love, art, and Europe as alternatives to despair and anarchy. In the stability of his marriage to Edith Anne Runk and the enduring values and monuments of France and Italy, Wright evolves equivalents to Adams' love of Marian Hooper and appreciations of the Virgin, art, Mont-Saint-Michel, and Chartres. But whereas Adams sought to remove himself from his responses by distancing them in laws of thermodynamics and devolution, Wright moves in his work to an ever increasing intimacy and reliance on humanism. Repeatedly in the work, readers are asked to listen to accounts of "incidents and situations from common life"—not for any promise of worldly or spiritual gain but for the fulfillment of their own natures. Whereas *Two Citizens* and *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* use Europe to come to terms with America (on occasion at the expense of distinction), *This Journey* displays a consistently rich and memorable series of "light flesh singing lightly" to others and the world.

What is memorable in Wright's work lies often not in the manner of his expression so much as in the clarity of his images. As in his previous volumes, Wright selects the "drab," "native," or "silver" style of English sixteenth-century verse. He avoids meaningless ornamentation and late Romantic and Symbolist concerns for quality and nuance. As did William Wordsworth, Wright seeks to imitate, "as far as possible, . . . the very language of men," so that in "some

[1] THIS JOURNEY, by *James Wright*. Random House. $10.50.

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of the most interesting parts of [his] best poems," one meets "the language of prose when prose is well-written." In such "prose," Wright's relationships to and definitions of actual and psychological situations become memorable. So, in "A Dark Moor Bird," the singing competition between an observed moor bird and the speaker takes on overtones of traditional pastoral contests in the poetries of Theocritus and Vergil. But, whereas these traditional contests argued two opposing human value systems, Wright's competition argues a gulf between nature and man. The bird which comes down from the mountains and appears so beautiful in his flight becomes in his song "like a plump chicken nagging a raccoon," and the speaker/raccoon who is "turning to stone" wishes that the bird "will never die." Yet, having argued ongoing life in "enduring" appeal—in the angel of "Young Women at Chartres" that is set amidst shadow, or the spider in the book's title poem that is outlined by "ruins [crumbling] on every side of her"—Wright knows, too, that nothing remains unaltered: nature erodes stone ("The Vestal in the Forum"), maggots attack flesh ("Contemplating the Front Steps of the Cathedral in Florence as the Century Dies"), and vandals spray "merda" on mountings ("Reading a 1979 Inscription on Belli's Monument").

Memorability in Wright's poetry gains an added support from the play of inner forces—the unexpected turns that arise when one lets "images grow, one out of another" so that form and a person's imaginative grasp of life are identical. Wright explains the process in his Brockport interview as "a willingness on the part of the poet to trust the language a little more, and perhaps to trust nature, trust other living things." Elsewhere, quoting Samuel Johnson, Wright warns, though, that "the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted and the mind can only repose in the stability of truth." Wonder should not replace "just representations of general nature" so much as check a poet's slipping into "glibness and excessive facility." Critics have questioned the success of the last line of "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" ("I have wasted my life") at achieving stable truth, and occasionally in pursuing "spirits of place," Wright has impatiently let place overpower structure. The impatience is less frequent in *This Journey*. In "Entering the Temple in Nîmes," for example, Wright approaches a gemcutter's precision in shaping and polishing facets to natural development. The poem opens on a flat resolve "to walk all through and around / The Temple of Diana." Something like a guidebook or classroom accuracy attends the speaker's noting that young Romans learned Diana's "name from the dark rock / Among bearded Greeks." Only when he begins to observe that the Romans learned her true nature in "the young women of Gaul" does his imagination take over. Glancing "back thoughtfully over their bare / White shoulders," these women change like the virginal Daphne (or Diana) into "vines" and "green places." Their "whiteness" opposes

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the Greeks' "dark rock" in a complex tension of love and war, nature and art, and legend and life. Wishing "the stone-eyed legions of rain / To put off their armour," the speaker prays to uncover hope among the pillars in "one vine leaf," despite the rain and his having come too late for spring.

"In a Field near Metaponto" returns readers to the same dialectic of I and nature that marks "A Dark Moor Bird." The poem begins with impersonal description, moves to a personal voice, resumes distance with "But now / A great block of cloud falls over / In an instant," and resolves personally:

> The huge columns, the temple of Apollo,
> Have blown over in the nights.
> I am tempted to say
> It doesn't matter. The frightened men who crept forward
> And cowered here, and turned back, are dead.
> Of no account now.
> But now
> A great block of cloud falls over
> In an instant, the sun
> Lashes its flames on the sea's shivering spine
> And glares straight down among the glittering hordes
> Of poppies where I stand. They can do nothing.
> They lean upward and lay
> The secrets of their bodies bare to this light,
> Till they die. I lean down,
> Pluck one poppy, tuck it
> Beside my ear like a Greek and stare for an instant
> And then turn away.

Readers may chart the "trust" and "growth" of images in Wright's transformations of the Sun God Apollo into the sun and flowers, or trace their development structurally from the temple columns and block of cloud to the standing speaker and glittering poppies. Both sequences seek to underscore a reversal of attitude. This reversal begins with the speaker's perception of cultural and natural losses and his desire not to involve himself emotionally. It ends with involvement in his plucking a poppy from the sun's glare. The "rescue" is seen both as a humane gesture to the ruined temple and as an acceptance of the speaker's own complementary, interdependent, creative and destructive nature. Repeating and opposing the actions of true believers with his movement and echoing the temporality of cloud, his actions achieve intensity and distinction less by Wright's intended insistence on choice ("They can do nothing. . . . I lean down . . .") than by the way that, for readers, his evolving, supportive, and finally displacing perceptions—like the poem's opening resolve—replace the statement they are supposed to reinforce.

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Finally, there are those emotional outbursts in Wright's poems that, often following ordinary language, lend memorability to incidents by revealing a latent and sometimes unexpected passion. A classic instance of these outbursts occurs in "Ohio Valley Swains" from *Two Citizens*. Recalling with detachment Johnny Gumball and his gang's rape of a girl, the speaker goes on first to close his distance by romanticizing the girl ("I loved her only in my dreams, / But my dreams meant something") and then to explode emotionally against Gumball ("You son of a bitch, / . . . if I ever see you again, so help me in the sight of God / I'll kill you"). In his review of the volume, Paul Ramsey objects to a poetic flatness accompanying these "truculent assertions of blunt hostility and equally bare statements of affection," though critics like Dave Smith and Leonard Nathan have subsequently defended the outbursts as a rejection of "modernist impersonality" and "codes of decorum" and as reflective of a new poetics that involves readers compassionately by making them judge a work "on how well it makes its audience experience the real presence of the poet as a real person." The outbursts do make the poet unmistakably present, but, without Wright's having to resort to the preciosity of rhetorical ornament, the outbursts also function to convey distinction and preciousness to what is presented. In *This Journey*, bald assertions continue in poems like "The Sumac in Ohio," "Wherever Home Is," and "Notes of a Pastoralist," though their abruptness has been muted by the more frequent transformation of composed places into counter-presences with which speakers interact and by Wright's increased tendency to include the I as part of the overall scene. Moreover, with their equally strong emphases on I-thou relationships, the poems lose none of their earlier abilities to plead for compassion.

Like *This Journey*, the *Collected Prose* was in preparation before Wright's death.[2] However, it was a far less finished manuscript. It never seems to have been planned as either a "complete" or what specialists may see as an "essential" prose. The collection omits, for example, Wright's only published short story, "The Latin Lesson" (1963); the excellent introduction to Hy Sobiloff's *Breathing of First Things* (1963); the early evaluations of Vassar Miller (1958), Richard Hugo (1961), and Brother Antoninus (1967); and the many omnibus reviews that helped clarify his values, positions, style, and direction. Mrs. Wright explains that some of the omissions are part of her husband's original intent. Others were dictated by the format of the series to which the collection belongs. Certainly, she has kept as much faith as she could with his wishes, and for most readers, the omissions will not be significant. The collection manages to suggest the positive ranges and caliber of Wright's criticism as well as to indicate some of the limitations. As in the poems, these limitations in-

[2] COLLECTED PROSE, by *James Wright*. Ed. by *Anne Wright*. University of Michigan Press. $8.95p.

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clude a falling back almost mechanically on certain honorific terms. In stating that the work of Gary Snyder (1962) has "the virtues of humor, delicacy, respect for living creatures, human and animal, patience and silence," Wright succumbs critically to the same "glibness and excessive facility" that he objects to in poetry. Similarly, in telling Michael André that his critical attacks on various "beat" poets came before he read their work and that now, having learned to read them, he feels differently, Wright confesses to a closed-mindedness that he would never allow in verse. As a way of explaining some of these limitations, Mrs. Wright notes that, despite his writing "only about writers he greatly admired and respected," in conversation and in letters Wright makes clear that "he wrote and published prose for money."

Foremost among the values of the collection are Wright's articulations of "single unifying effect" and methods for "continuous exploration." The concept of "single effect" is most clearly explained in the sections of Wright's dissertation on Charles Dickens that the *Collected Prose* prints for the first time. Wright shows how the word "board" works to unify divergent points of view in *Oliver Twist* and how actions "unify" and undermine notions of sanity and madness in *Barnaby Rudge*. The concept which greatly illuminates Dickens' craftsmanship is also central to Wright's poetry. Similarly central are the sacrifices to "smoothly formal versification" and "delicate music" that Wright sees occurring in Robert Penn Warren's *Promises* (1958). Warren's fighting "through and beyond his own craftsmanship in order to vitalize his language at the sources of tenderness and horror" offers a model for Wright's subsequent abandonment of "good" poems in *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963) and an exploration of his and others' moving beyond traditional metrics and verse forms. Also apparent in the essays and interviews are Wright's considerable capacities for seeing "a world in a grain of sand" and for arguing by enthymeme. Indeed, analogues to the emotional assertions of his poetry often intrude to violate logic and lend support to those critics who find emotion rather than reason at the heart of his vision. Wright acknowledges that, despite "there being something to be said for the light," often what he sings has "a certain darkness, an emotional darkness" that he wouldn't want to eliminate "from human experience entirely." Increasingly, as his interviews and recent writings affirm, "light" comes to take its place beside the "dark," and in *This Journey*, it is this "light" that so brightens events that it appears to prevail.

A poet who is as original and memorable as Wright is bound to arouse some resistance from the more settled of his readers. The resistance is apparent in a number of the essays collected by Dave Smith into his strong and very useful *The Pure Clear Word*.[3] Smith

[3] THE PURE CLEAR WORD, ed. by *Dave Smith*. University of Illinois Press. $18.95.

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reprints W. H. Auden's Introduction to *The Green Wall* (1957) along with Robert Bly's excellent early study in the *Sixties* (1966). Smith also selects essays by Leonard Nathan, Robert Hass, and himself which appeared originally in the Wright issue of *Ironwood* (1977), and pieces by James Seay and Edward Butscher that appeared first in the *Georgia Review*. Studies by William Matthews, Stephen Yenser, and Bonnie Costello are also reprinted. To them, Smith has added an introduction, a long interview, a selected bibliography, and new essays by Henry Taylor, Peter Stitt, and Miller Williams. The Auden and Bly pieces established early approaches to Wright's work and touch on matters of originality, theme, and language. The long interview, which appears also in the *Collected Prose*, contains a great deal of biographical information that will be valuable to readers of Wright's work, and the Yenser essay is a strong, sympathetic analysis of Wright's prose poetry. The pieces by Seay, Nathan, and Smith offer approaches for Wright's middle and later poetry, and the Stitt essay provides an interesting new segment of an evolving book-length study of "quest." But, perhaps because they are sympathetic, the reservations to Wright's work that the Butscher, Hass, and Costello essays raise may for the moment dominate what is otherwise a highly supportive volume. All seem to object to the triumph of emotion in Wright's poetry. Butscher sees the triumph as a fall into sentimentality; Hass as a betrayal of the poet's intelligence for the speaker's supposed feeling; and Costello as part of a distracting general, unresolved confusion. Each argues, moreover, for damage being worst in different volumes and periods.

In the same "Preface to Shakespeare" (1765) that Wright was fond of citing, Johnson notes that "while an author is yet living we estimate his powers by his worst performance, and when he is dead, we rate them by his best." No doubt, some of the objections to Wright's work that appear in the Smith collection will lessen as more and more critics come to define Wright's role in helping to bring a new kind of "American reality" to contemporary poetry. This "reality," as Lionel Trilling has noted, "is always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable, and unpleasant," and only that mind is "trustworthy" that most nearly reproduces the sensations which the reality affords. Being "of the moment," the sensations, however, counter the "essential passions," "elemental feelings," and "general nature" that, like Wordsworth, Wright feels are essential for art. Emphasizing their temporality promotes Wright's historical importance at the expense of the aesthetical. At present, what seem most striking are the abrupt changes in style that occur with *The Branch Will Not Break* and again with *Two Citizens*. One suspects that the future of Wright's reputation may rest for a time less on real achievement than on attempts to draw a consistent overview to contain these changes or to endorse change by stressing them. Eventually, readers may come to appreciate how by

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locating so much of his poetry in remembered settings, nature, and semi-urban surroundings, Wright seeks to free his best poems of time, and how in these poems his being a political poet is less important than his being a poet of praise, love, and unexpected grace. As he himself said, "Seeing the thing itself as it really is, is only the first part of the task. . . . Behind everything in my general thought and feelings [is] the idea that one of the worst things in American life is waste." Reminding readers "of the religious value of things, the life of the spirit, . . . inner life" is crucial to his art.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

DERWENT MAY is the Literary Editor of *The Listener*. He has just published a study of *Proust* in the Oxford University Press *Past Masters* series, and *The Times Nature Diary* (Robson Books), a collection of his weekly articles from *The London Times*.

ROBERT McDOWELL teaches English at Indiana State University-Evansville and is co-editor of *The Reaper*.

KATHLEEN HILL* lives and teaches in New York City. "Sisters and Brother" is her first short story accepted for publication.

The poems by HERBERT LOMAS* which appear in this issue will be included in his *Fire in the Garden*, due next June from Oxford University Press. Anvil Press Poetry published his most recent volume, *Public Footpath*.

ALICE BLOOM lives in Mount Vernon, Maine and teaches in the Department of English at the University of Maine in Farmington.

EMILY GROSHOLZ' first collection of poems, *The River Painter*, is due this December from University of Illinois Press. Ms. Grosholz teaches philosophy at Pennsylvania State University.

JOHN FINLAY is currently finishing a book of poems and a critical study of the gods in modern literature. He lives on a farm in south Alabama.

KEITH WILSON* lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

NANCY CARDOZO's selected poems, *Helmet of the Wind*, was published by Bobbs-Merrill in 1972.

DAN MASTERSON's * first collection of poems, *On Earth As It Is*, was published in 1978 by University of Illinois Press. His second is nearing completion. He directs the Poetry Writing Program at Rockland Community College.

MARK PERLBERG's second book of poems, *The Feel of the Sun*, was published last year by Swallow/Ohio University Press.

GERALD WEALES teaches drama at the University of Pennsylvania and is theater reviewer for *Commonweal*. At present he is completing a study of American film comedy of the 1930s.

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Princeton University Press recently published JEROME MAZZARO's *The Figure of Dante*. He teaches at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

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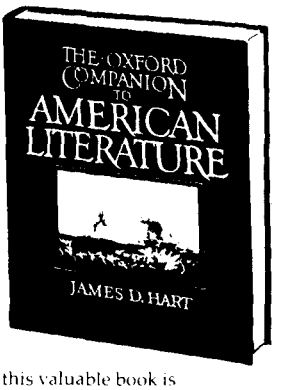


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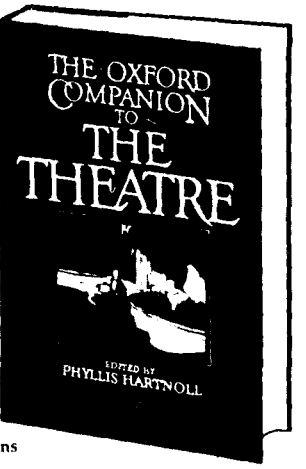


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IN THIS ISSUE:

"Mom," said one of our boys the first day embarking from the beach taxi, thirty hours from the chill proprieties of Logan Airport and our own northern beaches where, for all but a few days of the year, you need a wool sweater, "Mom, that lady over there doesn't have on a whole suit." We had not expected this, I don't know why we didn't, but so she doesn't, and, at once clear, neither does anyone else. This is not at all a *normal moment. It is a startling moment. More so if one has* no thought of doing it oneself.

—Alice Bloom, "On a Greek Holiday," page 463

A more general concern for the welfare of birds and animals is also very noticeable just now. A girl standing by me in a shop was wearing a badge: "Fight Speciesism." "That's like racism, is it?" I said. "One species exploiting another?" "That's it." I suggested that the campaign had a pretty big task on hand, considering that virtually every species of creature in the universe survives by exploiting another. "In fact," I said, "man is surely the only species that to some extent tries not to." She agreed, rather embarrassed, with this. "Still, they've started trying to turn some dogs into vegetarians," she added, with a not-very-hopeful look.

—Derwent May, "Letter from London," page 434

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